

Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America

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## Introduction: Approximations, Apologies, Acknowledgments

It was once my pretense that I was using stand-up comedy to write cultural history; the book I had in mind would have been thin as cultural history, but in any case I did not write it. The book I have written does not exploit stand-up but attempts to provide it with a theory—or a first approximation of one. It would be gratifying to imagine that the theory will contribute to some future cultural history, probably not written by me.

Here is a first glimpse of the cultural-historical data I hope this theory will eventually clarify. Around 1960, Jewish heterosexual men formed the pool of American citizens that produced most American stand-up comedians. According to one guess, 80 percent of nationally known stand-ups at the time were Jewish men; that they were Jewish men is more verifi-



able than that they were heterosexual, though that was the universal understanding.<sup>1</sup>

There are, of course, many ways to look at this, but it is easier to begin by specifying how not to look at it. I do not infer from their prevalence in stand-up that Jewish heterosexual men were, in 1960, the funniest people in America. That would be impossible to substantiate; it is impossible to be lucid about what that would even mean. However, I do not want to reduce Jewish stand-up dominance to a merely institutional fact, as if to say that just as many Methodist women were very funny but were simply not given the same breaks by the stand-up establishment as Jewish men. That many comedy sites were owned by Jews is of course true—but this would be a cultural and historical fact to be explained, not entirely dissimilar from the one that occupies us at the beginning of this study. Furthermore, the fact that Jews owned and operated many nightclubs did not entail the prevalence of Jewish popular singers, nor did it force Ed Sullivan and Steve Allen to promote Jewish comedians before a national audience.

These antithetical hypotheses—that Jewish men were the funniest Americans or that Jewish male comedians were simply preferred by Jewish male comedy impresarios—fail for the same reason: humor is (I shall say more about this) unfalsifiable and incorrigible. If there were comedy audiences (at the Grand Ole Opry or the Apollo, say) who had non-Jewish comedic preferences, they had a right to them. If, on the other hand, the general American public wanted Jewish male comedians above all, for reasons we should be able to reconstruct, then male Jews were the best ones for the job. The cultural fact I want to isolate as my starting point is the connection between being a Jewish heterosexual man in America in 1960 and making one sort of living.

The job was, I take it, to provide humor of a certain kind in a certain setting. Not the humor of the dozens, for example, or of camp. And so I began with what seemed to me a promising aperçu: the tense intimacy of national stand-up comedy as it was practiced in 1960 and the suburban moment of modern American culture. Lenny Bruce provided one take on suburbanization. From the far reaches of Long Island, he came to New York City to learn how to be a Jewish comedian, and his humor was an affront to suburbia on behalf of hip urbanites and suburbanites alike. The comedy of Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner was another take. Carl Reiner was the suburbanizer (he would set his humor commuting to New Rochelle for *The Dick Van Dyke Show*) in loving proximity to Mel Brooks's weird Englishing of urban *Yiddishkeit*. The suburbanizing Jew and the citifying Middle Ameri-

can (whose prime comedy habitat was the late-night New York talk show: Jack Paar of Michigan, Johnny Carson of Iowa and Nebraska, Dick Cavett of Nebraska, David Letterman of Indiana) together formed the chiasmus of our postwar national humor. “National” is key: Judaism on *The Tonight Show* was a contribution to nation rebuilding on the suburban model as a turn from Zionism and Marxism. Freud’s joke theory, which centers on the covering up of laughter’s sources in aggression and sex, has at least the merit of elucidating the suburban moment of American comedy and culture, if suburbs grew on the energy of the same concealments.

This is not by any means the whole story of Jewish stand-up success, but it is the cultural part of the story that first occurred to me, and I still vouch for it. It is the basis of the structure of this book: three essays on Jewish stand-up as it flourished for several years before 1960 and a few years after (first on Lenny Bruce, second on Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner, third on Mike Nichols and Elaine May), three essays on stand-up in its wake (first on David Letterman, second on Richard Pryor, third on Ellen DeGeneres and Paula Poundstone). I was not trying to locate and analyze the most influential post-World War II American stand-up comedians (where is Mort Sahl? Woody Allen? Lily Tomlin? George Carlin?) or the funniest ones (where are Jonathan Winters, Buddy Hackett, Robin Williams, and Steve Martin?). I am not, for the purposes of this book, interested in the brilliant Jewish stand-ups of the present. I confess that I only chose to write about comedians who seemed essential to my story.

Its outline is this: America, between 1960 and the millennium, in a process that began around the ascension of Johnny Carson or the Kennedy assassination, comedified.<sup>2</sup> Stand-up was once a field given over to a certain subsection of a certain ethnicity. By now, roughly speaking, all America is the pool for national stand-up comedy. So, in the second half of my book, I needed to examine comedians who were not Jewish, or not male, or not heterosexual, or not any of these.

The problem, from the cultural studies point of view, is that the end of my narrative had plenty of potential exemplars to support my argument, but no moral. I was quite sure that what I was describing was not reducible to a triumph of multicultural inclusiveness. That is no doubt a part of the significance of the plot. But what would it mean to add that society has taken to its heart such distinctly non-Jewish comedians as Steve Martin, Robin Williams, and David Letterman? (Would it signal a recentering or de-centering of WASP culture in America? Comedy exists to upset such primer anthropology.) I seemed to need some cultural fact equal and opposite to

suburbanization for the story of stand-up's post-high Jewish continuation, but I could not think of one that did not seem to me banal or prophetic or false.

It was at this impasse that the project turned theoretical rather than cultural. But it happens, I think, that you can get back to the cultural after all. This remains to be seen; in what is left of this introduction, I make a few theoretical suggestions, with the hope that it is possible to find in stand-up theory *per se* some indication at least of how the comedification of America might be explained.

As I wrote these essays, over time, abjection became my master theme. I mean by abjection two things. First, I mean by it what everybody means by it: abasement, groveling prostration. Second, I mean by it what Julia Kristeva means: a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of, that seem, but are not quite, alienable—for example, blood, urine, feces, nails, and the corpse.<sup>3</sup> The “abject,” in Kristeva’s term of art, indicates what cannot be subject or object to you; but I came to realize that that was also the essence of abjection as it is commonly understood. When you feel abject, you feel as if there were something miring your life, some skin that cannot be sloughed, some role (because “abject” always, in a way, describes how you *act*) that has become your only character. Abjection is self-typecasting.

The one-sentence version of the theory of this book would state the claim that what is stood up in stand-up comedy is abjection. Stand-up makes vertical (or ventral) what should be horizontal (or dorsal). I had not quite seen this definition at the time of the Lenny Bruce essay, but it was lurking there, and I want to leave that essay as originally written because I still like the way it formulates the issue. The conclusion of the Bruce essay is that “stand-up is the resurrection of your father as your child,” which approaches the same point from another angle. What I took as the essential Lenny Bruce moment is the joke (if that is what it is) that concludes “I am going to piss on you” and provokes, at one performance, seventeen seconds of boisterous laughter. What struck me is how phallicly aggressive Bruce was able to make this infantile threat, so that he appeared to the audience as punishing father and naughty son in rapid oscillation, just as his audience had to vibrate (this vibration seems to me the essence of laughter) between terrorized child and permissive parent. The abject gets erected and mobilized in the place of the phallus. To “stand up” abjection is simultaneously to erect it and miss one’s date with it: comedy is a way of avowing and disavowing abjection, as fetishism is a way of avowing and disavow-

ing castration. Fetishism is a way of standing up the inevitability of loss; stand-up is a way of standing up the inevitability of return.

*Abjection* becomes an explicitly key term in my final three chapters. I begin the second half of the book with David Letterman—that I place Letterman before Pryor is one sign that the book purports to be theoretical rather than historical. Letterman's abjection takes its essential American form in an abstract repudiation of the body (which is mechanized) and its distanced and displaced return: the body declares its inalienability only by way of disposable interviewees like Eddie Murphy or Madonna. The late-night New York City talk show puts American abjection on national display before the abject watchers of tv. The structure of the show is chiasmic: the hick visitor in New York is the "host" of the show, and the city kid (which is how we identify Jackie Mason when he is interviewed by Jack Paar, Don Rickles when he is interviewed by Johnny Carson, and Eddie Murphy or Madonna when they are interviewed by Letterman, regardless of actual origins) is his "guest." The crossing is what is most lovable in America, though its mode of mechanical abstraction predicts virtual reality.

David Letterman takes the legacy of Lenny Bruce one way, Richard Pryor the other. Letterman rediscovers the fuel of paternal aggression in Bruce's filial abjection; Pryor finds in Bruce's excremental regression to infancy the possibility of forestalling abjection altogether. Pryor's refusal of the usual stand-up posture—the standing up of abjection—is the result, I think, of his self-identification in an abjected race. He is not the sufferer of abjection, he *is* the abjection, the body that is repudiated yet keeps returning. He allows the body to speak regardless of his own self-interest; when it returns in the form of a heart attack, he falls to the floor, sacrificing the stand-up posture literally. Pryor's purpose is to find the Rabelaisian comedy of this radical leveling.

That sounds like a climactic sentence, but it could not represent the climax of *this* book, which must come to a triumph of abjection or betray its subject. The issue of homosexuality in comedy is first raised in my Carl Reiner/Mel Brooks chapter; the subject of women in comedy, in my chapter on Mike Nichols and Elaine May; they return in tandem in my final chapter on Ellen DeGeneres and Paula Poundstone. These motives return in the way of the abject: as the alienable that keeps not being alienated. We might have expected female strategies parallel to Pryor's, but we do not get them. Standing up abjection turns out to be the mode of DeGeneres and Poundstone's familiar, mainstream appeal, though it is in the event so self-denying an appeal that it allows them to escape from audience view

altogether. The final paradox is that their strategy of evasion by way of vertical abjection is not so much a peculiar female use of stand-up as it is a brilliant redeployment of what all stand-ups do. Stand-up itself has the structure of abjection insofar as comedians are not allowed to be either natural or artificial. (Are they themselves or acting? Are they in costume?) Reality keeps returning to stand-up performance, but the deepest desire of stand-ups is to be, with respect to their lives, unencumbered. All a stand-up's life feels abject to him or her, and stand-ups try to escape it by living it as an act.

On the back cover of Ellen DeGeneres's book, *My Point . . . And I Do Have One*, is a portrait of the comedian as chameleon. (She is dressed in white and sitting in the corner of a white room, her head bowed and her cropped hair facing forward.) *This* is where a book on stand-up needs to end. Her desire to escape has gone as far as it can—she is trying to dissolve herself in her environment. But if she were to succeed, it would be the end of stand-up begun by sitting down. The desire is for such a rampant, couchant, disembodied whiteness that it seems a fitting complement of Pryor's incorporated blackness. American abjectness taken to its extreme is a craving for abstraction.

I am, throughout these essays, impressed by the beautiful abstract geometry of stand-up. I treat this at the beginning of my essay on Bruce, and again at some length in my essay on Brooks and Reiner and at points thereafter. The appeal of comedy for me is akin to the appeal of math, except that the formal abstraction of a gag retains as its subject matter the pollution of the liminal, so that Mel Brooks's ur-joke is a logical deduction from a rotten nectarine. This is another way of putting the abjection theme, but it is also another way of putting the relevance of stand-up to the suburbanization theme, to which I can now return, with a revised understanding of it.

I said that for the suburban moment of American culture, half-suburbanized Jewish comedians, whose joke work was the structural equivalent of a suburban commute, were the desired thing; what was desired, more generally, however, was an updating of the destiny of American abjection, and it has become increasingly unclear, in this introduction, that Jewish male heterosexuals ever had it all to themselves. The solution to the paradox is how thoroughly Jewish male heterosexual comedians in 1960 were female, homosexual, black, and Christianizing.

Mike Nichols and Elaine May were enough, by themselves, to upset traditional gender categories. The cliché that stand-up was so macho that a female comedian (or comedienne, as she would have been called) had to

be a hag was definitively falsified by May. (Phyllis Diller had gone so far as to phallicize or bewitch herself to make it in the world of high-gag comedy.) But the fact that May did not disguise her femininity—though it came in various guises—was compatible with the fact that she was the stronger presence of the team and often *played* rather daunting characters, as if they were roles. She was the sublime in human form. In his more oppressed moments, Nichols, both playing and inhabiting the weaker position, would cry or allow his voice to break like Shelley Berman's; at such moments, it was unclear where femininity, in Jewish comedy, would land.

In my essay on Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks, I make much of the homosexuality buried in their homosocial act. Thus queer theory comes up for the first time in the book, but not the last. It comes up in the first place because stand-up has been traditionally (this has changed) an affair of male comedians and male audiences (some of that erotics informs the relationship of Brooks and Reiner, with Reiner representing the audience's love). Freud, I think, was wrong to have assumed that what we now call homosociality is in joking only a detouring of normal heterosexuality, conceived of as competitive and sexually aggressive. The homosociality, as Eve Sedgwick would have it, defines the heterosexuality. But the subject of homosexuality lingers in my book, because the frontal macho of the stand-up position needs, somehow or other, to be paradoxical to be funny.

And what modern Jewish comedian is not in an important way already a black comedian? There was stand-up comedy before 1966, but that is when the term came into existence,<sup>4</sup> and what seems to have been established over the decade before it was named was the contribution of jazz improvisation to how comedians thought of themselves. Lenny Bruce placed himself directly in the jazz tradition; Nichols and May improvised to music; Mel Brooks's obsession with blackness came out explicitly in *Blazing Saddles*. Here Michael Rogin is helpful: the Jewish approach to white America—as in *The Jazz Singer*—was made through blackface.

It was made, in sum, through the black body, the homosexual body, and the female body. "Through" them means "by way of abjecting" them. These bodies—I think this is a cliché I can rely on—signify the body itself. On behalf of the American suburb, heretofore Protestant, Jewish comedians took the body and turned it into a gag, which is not the same as expressing it or repressing it. It is abstracting what is the essence of the concrete. (I invert the view of Schopenhauer, who thought of laughter as the revenge of the sensuous on the conceptual.) Meanwhile, comedians like Johnny Carson and David Letterman brought their honed talent for abstraction—in their heads, jokes become jokes about jokes—to the city in search of the bodies

their minds had thrown off; they found there an abjection that was peculiarly congenial and complementary.

This is all to say that it was misguided to look for a cause of the Jewish stand-up dominance of 1960 and another cause for the full comedification of America ever since. The hypothesis is that the Jewish comedians of 1960 stood up precisely at the place where body was idealized and materiality abstracted—which after World War II was preeminently defined as a point between New York City (or Chicago) and its suburbs. A century before, the place for it was Concord; American Jewish stand-up seems to me a moment of American cultural history, or the Puritan wing of that history, whose central figure may be Thoreau, abject comedian before the letter. That some of what Jewish comedians usurped has leaked back into the mainstream or into other tributaries is only the result of a law of nature, for which this book finds evidence. A theory of stand-up is a theory of what to do with your abjection; at a moment of cultural history when abjection is startlingly pervasive, for reasons that a cultural historian ought to be commissioned to discover, stand-up inherits its highest aspiration.

Two further comments on the writing of this book. First: I wrote several of these chapters as freestanding essays. At some point, early on, I began to sense their coherence, and I have tried to assimilate them as much as I can. But the Lenny Bruce chapter began as an essay for a volume on expressions of outrage at works of art, and retains marks of that purpose. Other chapters show signs of transitory interests.

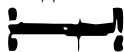
Second, and more interestingly: my sense of how to write about stand-up altered over time. The first two essays I wrote, which happen to be the first two essays of this book, were on Lenny Bruce and the team of Brooks and Reiner. In both, I keep circling paradigmatic moments of their respective oeuvres: the urinating threat in Bruce and the nectarine dithyramb in Reiner/Brooks. I was determined to study only the most inexplicable jokes, reversing the technique of previous joke theorists. I was also desperate. I had little idea, and still have little idea, how to write about the form of a stand-up routine. I am afraid that by the third essay I wrote, on David Letterman, I was so resolved not to cling to another synecdoche that I almost never mention anything funny Letterman has ever said. This seems justifiable in retrospect, since it is in the nature of Letterman's work that no single moment of his career could be brilliantly exemplary (his distinction is in the hegemony of unchanging attitude); but the absence of jokes from that essay feels odd. I knew, by the time of my Pryor piece, that I had to discuss the form of a performance.

I got lucky. The Pryor performance in question had a peculiar climax, so that it was possible to see the unity of the concert. The climax—or, really, the anticlimax—was not exactly a punch line, which simplified things: the problem with seeing a stand-up performance (five or twenty or ninety minutes) as a single aesthetic object is that stand-up is dominated by mini-climaxes—the series of punch lines—that are not readily convertible into straight lines for a metaclimax or punch line of the whole. (In the case of Pryor’s anticlimax, literally about the relief of sex without ejaculation, closure is provided by the release from that intermittent pressure.) I had, therefore, established no general procedure by my Pryor analysis, and the two subsequent essays that I wrote, on Poundstone and DeGeneres and Nichols/May, make no extended allusions to the subject of aesthetic form, except insofar as I theorize in both essays the meaning of anticlimax itself. It may be that an art reliant on short bursts for its structure needs a full-blown theory of anticlimax to elucidate the unity of its form; nevertheless, I am unable to venture one here.

The one advantage of writing this book piecemeal is that the chapters have acquired separate readerships. I have received very useful advice and encouragement from these readers: Steve Tifft, Anita Sokolsky, Chris Pye, Karen Swann, Regina Kunzel, Rachana Kamtekar, Jana Sawicki, Maud Ellmann, Bob Bell, Larry Graver, Shawn Rosenheim, Cassandra Cleghorn, Jim Shepard, D. L. Smith, Frederick Crews, Lynn Wardley, Warner Berthoff, Bill Brown, Joanna Spiro and Sarah Winter (on behalf of the editorial board of the *Yale Journal of Criticism*), Jay Watson (and an anonymous reader at *Journal X*), and especially Frances Restuccia. Emma Limon makes an uncredited cameo appearance at a key point. I would like to thank Maureen Mills and Ellen Ginsburg at Home Box Office for archival help; the *Yale Journal of Criticism*, *Journal X*, and *Raritan* for permission to use material that first appeared in their pages; and Williams College, which supported this work by many generousities. For support and advice at Duke University Press, I am grateful to Sharon Parks Torian, Paula Dragosh, and Reynolds Smith; thanks to Donald Pease for expediting things there; I am also indebted to its three anonymous reviewers. I am slightly too late in dedicating this book to my father, Albert H. (Bob) Sands (1925–1999).



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Three theorems survey stand-up comedy as an absolute or ideal genre. In each one, “you” is second-person plural: you, the audience.

1. If you think something is funny, it is. You may be (collectively) puzzled by your amusement or disapprove of it, but you cannot be wrong about it. This means three things. First, individual reservations are irrelevant: any member of the audience who is unamused by a generally well-received joke should be regarded as merely deflecting the group response, which is still single-minded and unimpeachable. Second, individual recantations are invalid. An individual may suspect that what he or she called love was lust or loneliness, or that suffering was self-pity. But the collective experience of humor, like the personal experience of pain, fills its moment and perishes; reflection misprizes it of necessity. (Laughter may be the so-

cial equivalent of pain, the *group* incorrigible.) Third, you cannot be retroactively disabused by a critic. To criticize a joke is to miss it, because the joke, as Freud demonstrates, is, in the first instance, an escape from criticism to a prior happiness.<sup>1</sup>

The incorrigibility of your response is peculiar to comedy among all forms of art. You may wrongly think a symphony, for example, is beautiful when you have been seduced by the loveliness of the evening or the lyric athleticism of the conductor. Stand-up is uniquely audience-dependent for its value because joking is, essentially, (1) a social phenomenon (no audience, no joke, Freud noted, observing that an untransmitted joke is not, structurally, a joke [*SE*, 431]), and (2) a fully embedded phenomenon. The particularities of the relationship of joke teller and audience do not make the joke seem more or less funny; they make the joke more or less funny.

Because it is plausible to assert that an audience is wrong about, say, an opera (critics will judge) or a novel (posterity will judge), opera and literature can stake claims to seriousness. To be serious means to despise the audience—to reserve the right of appeal to a higher jurisdiction. But we can say about a stand-up audience's laughter what Freud says about the unconscious: there is "no process that resembles 'judging'" in its vicinity (*SE*, 175).

2. A joke is funny if and only if you laugh at it. This theorem quarantines comedy not from the serious, but from the humorous in all nonspecific settings. If you laugh at a rude gesture in a tennis match or at a caesura of prosaic commentary during a poetry reading, you are laughing from relief; you may laugh at a presidential witticism out of respect. But laughter at a stand-up routine signifies that the joke is funny, and the joke cannot be funny without it. A joke at which the audience smiles or nods its approbation is a failed joke; a joke at which the audience laughs is a good joke in proportion to its laughter. Perhaps, say, a comedian has been so successful (in his routine, in his career) that your laughter is indiscriminate. This behavior only indicates that you are the sort of audience inclined to find humor (not every audience is this unresentful) where it knows it to have passed before.

An individual has the right to say: I am certain (I remember) that I did not experience joke *x* as funny, but I was laughing along with the audience. There are studies on the subject: laughing is only mildly correlated with the experience of humor, more strongly among women, less strongly among men.<sup>2</sup> The audience itself cannot claim this.

3. Your laughter is the single end of stand-up. Theorem number 2 distinguishes stand-up from the generally and informally humorous (the audi-

ence of which has not assembled for the sake of laughing); this theorem distinguishes stand-up from all other particular and formal settings of humor. Stand-up comedy does not require plot, closure, or point. Jokes may be as short as ingenuity allows, and there need not be anything *but* jokes. Constant, unanimous laughter is the limit case. Any comedian is free, of course, to thematize or editorialize or beautify, but in these respects, he or she has in mind extrinsic models. I am demarcating *absolute* stand-up.

It is simple to intuit in this ideal structure (the audience cannot err, it cannot feign, it cannot be misled) why comedians might, above all other artists and entertainers, hate their audiences; but the most comprehensive way to put the matter is that they hate their audiences because they are not, as performers, entirely distinct from them. Audiences turn their jokes into jokes, as if the comedian had not quite thought or expressed a joke until the audience thinks or expresses it. Stand-up is all supplement. Freud describes in the teller-told exchange a system of transitive inhibitions (*SE*, 150–51), but I am noting a formal as much as a psychological relation. Laughter is more than the value of a routine; more than a determinant of the routine (its rhythm influencing the comedian's timing or its volume his direction); it is the arteries and veins of the routine's circulation.<sup>3</sup>

In this light, it is hard to fathom how a stand-up performance can be outrageous, that is to say (etymologically) *outré*, outside the circle. In stand-up as opposed to all other modes of art and entertainment, there is only the circle. The audience cannot be wrong or lie because it cannot reflect or judge: you can fail to see the joke, but so long as you see it, it is yours. That syndrome is itself sufficiently outrageous; but then it is the syndrome and not the joke that creates the emotion, and we can infer that every joke emits its own outraged aura. Even in the case of Lenny Bruce, the outrageous comedian par excellence, the most that can be granted is that outrage is the aura of the circulating comedy, which is why it has never been decided whether the condition of "outrage," an inevitable term in all discussions of Bruce, is better attributed to Bruce or his audience.<sup>4</sup>

Absolute stand-up, so defined, is akin to Clausewitz's "absolute war": the shared object is perfect devastation. Absolute war is unlike all actual wars; real wars continue policy by other means, so that perfect devastation is never necessary or desirable. To conceive of absolute war is to measure ordinary armed belligerence by its lapse from an atemporal, geometric ideal. Absolute stand-up is a cognate notion insofar as the mathematical aspect of comedy, noted by many commentators but rarely elaborated, is the result of its pursuit of an apocalyptic technique. In the distance that an actual stand-up situation strays from the absolute, we may register the ir-

ruptions of alien impulses—we can quantify, for one thing, the interference of audience outrage.

Let us give it a try. To what variety of audience is the following Lenny Bruce quatrain a joke? That is: what variety of audience would cocreate the following Lenny Bruce quatrain *as* a joke? What variety of audience would find the quatrain outrageous—in other words, not a bad joke but a nonjoke?

If you've, er, [pause]

Ever seen this bit before, I want you to tell me.

Stop me if you've seen it. [long pause]

I'm going to piss on you.<sup>5</sup>

How is it possible for us (not part of the scene) to guess? The routine is so perfectly focused here as a joke (setup, delay, punch line) that it is worth pondering why, in that case, it is hard to ascertain if a joke is what we are examining. The form, according to the terms of the cognitive joke theorists, is perfect: the incongruity of the last line is at the same time a novel resolution of narrative tension. Cognitive joke theorists argue that all a joke's humor is in what Freud calls the "joke work"; the joke work here is crystalline, a rarity in a Lenny Bruce routine, so long as (a single hesitation) the punch line makes, in an unanticipated context, some sense.<sup>6</sup>

Freud believes, on the other hand, that in all "tendentious" jokes there is, underneath the joke work, a repressed content, unhumorous but willing to be humored, which is either aggressive or sexual. On Freud's account, we never know exactly why we laugh because we cannot estimate how much of our laughter disguises satisfactions that are distinctly unfunny. Given that "sexual" means "excremental/sexual" (*SE*, 96–98), Bruce's joke, if that is what it is, is almost too obliging a Freudian specimen: sexual and excremental and aggressive at once, almost literally exhibitionistic and almost immediately hostile where the usual joke's exhibitionism is displaced (*SE*, 143) and its hostility is triangulated (*SE*, 100).

Joke analysts and psychoanalysts are easily amused (they laugh at anything); so are, to widen the radius one more notch, joke anthropologists. Bruce, let us say, or let *them* say, is a "sacred clown," a "ceremonial buffoon": "Ritual humor is characterized by purposeful verbal and nonverbal behavior by individuals and groups in which persons of high status and authority, foreigners, and rituals and ceremonies are parodied, sexual activities are simulated in an exaggerated manner, and simulated defecation and urination are carried out with scatological overtones."<sup>7</sup> The point is how easy it is to refer behavior to a humor theory without quite knowing whether it is funny. As the canniest of all joke anthropologists, Mary

Douglas, puts it: “When people throw excrement at one another whenever they meet, either verbally or actually, can this be interpreted as a case of wit, or merely written down as a case of throwing excrement?”<sup>8</sup>

What begins to appear is that Bruce’s quatrain is a tour de force of meta-humor, a play on all such comic hermeneutics. It says: for once my joke will have a perfect shape, so perfect you will comprehend the weirdness of getting aggression and excretion into form. The repressed content will be so near the surface that you will not be able to calibrate whether it is repressed or unleashed. The ritual nature of the performance will be its tired justification: “Let me do a few talk bits,” Bruce tells the audience he has told prior audiences; “No,” he reports that prior audiences have always responded, “piss on us first and then do the rest of it.” This does not, however, settle the matter of whether anyone will laugh, which is to say that a metajoke is not necessarily even a joke.

In Australia, at any rate, it was no joke. Bruce managed, in the first half of his first show on the continent, to scandalize his audience sufficiently that four women walked out. This galled Bruce, so he told the joke immediately after intermission, in the following version: “I’m going to do something that’s never been done before in a nightclub—I’m going to *piss* on you.” To which the verdict, Albert Goldman reports, was negative: “The audience cowered. A few masochistic giggles were the only response. Some people thought Lenny was mad. Some thought he needed a fix. Some thought he was being deliberately outrageous because he wanted the engagement canceled.” The audience could not see how to take the threat as a joke, but Goldman adds, knowingly, that “the line was ‘material,’ something he’d said before and would say again. It was intended as a sick joke, an attention-grabber, a Joe Ancis fantasy on the relations between performers and audiences. None of these meanings registered with the Australians.”

Was it the Australians’ fault? Goldman seems to think so. But if the joke is a comment on performer-audience relations, it is critical to observe with some precision what is happening between them. What appears to be happening, generally, is that Bruce and his Australian audience are failing to compose a comedy circle at all. Bruce’s jokes are not bombing so much as not becoming jokes in the first place. I wonder about the accuracy of Goldman’s reminder that what Bruce told the Australians was a standard bit. My only contribution to what Goldman knows almost everything about is that the bit, in the version I have heard, is exactly opposite to the Australian routine. In the setup I have transcribed, public urination is a ritual that Bruce is tired of celebrating; in Australia, it is a nightclub novelty. For that reason, the “joke” in Australia has precious little joke work. Urinating on

an audience may be a surprise to them, but that urinating on an audience is a surprise is no surprise.

Bruce does not abandon his stand-up duties entirely: he makes a stab at pretending that the Australian audience will find his offensiveness delightfully unusual. But the joke can only be funny as a revelation of what an audience secretly desires, and there is no evidence that the audience in Australia secretly hoped to share the element of Bruce's abjection. The joke that Bruce and his American audience share is that the latter demands to be abject, demands, by such treatment, to be outraged, which is to say, if I may pronounce the too evident paradox, demands not to be outraged.

I cannot remember if Bruce's urinating routine ever seemed funny to me, but for twenty-five years (since I first heard it on a record) I have carried around in my memory the reaction of an American audience to the joke as I have transcribed it. Again:

If you've, er, [pause]

Ever seen this bit before, I want you to tell me.

Stop me if you've seen it. [long pause]

I'm going to piss on you.

Here is the punch line that tops the punch line: Bruce waits after his announcement, and for a half second a fraction of the audience rumbles, followed—so closely that the first stage is easy to miss—by seventeen seconds of unanimous laughter, accompanied by the sound of one or two people clapping though not applauding: adding the percussion to their laughter, as if it were not possible to laugh sharply enough. Goldman reports that Bruce could ignite an amazing laugh; all I can say is that I have not often experienced it. *This* response would be a revelation, except that jokes depend on a ratio of manifesting and concealing. Consider that two seconds of laughter is respectable; four seconds greets the best joke of a standard *Tonight Show* monologue. To get a laugh up to six seconds—an extraordinary occasion—you generally need two distinct waves of laughter, as in the case of jokes that are immediately funny and funnier (they are usually self-reflexive) upon reprocessing.

It was, technically, a better joke in America than in Australia. It is almost precise to say that only in America was it a joke. But that brute fact does not account for fifteen of the seventeen seconds. Nor does the laughter ever seem to wane and wax; everyone laughs unanimously at high volume throughout. There are no hints that the joke is being milked during that time by gestures. Twice, Bruce attempts to calm the uproar to finish the bit. At long last, he succeeds, though the magic has drained out. He tries

to make it clear, as if to himself, what the joke is, or to repeat it, to make sure everyone else knows. But everyone, for seventeen seconds, has been perfectly aware what the joke is.

The looming questions are these: why in America as opposed to Australia is the Bruce threat a joke (why, in the first half second of response, can you almost literally hear the joke work working), and why, after the minimum two seconds of laughter activated by the joke work, is there an additional quarter of a minute of hilarity that begins to suggest hysteria? The first clue comes from a sentence I have not explicated in Goldman's analysis of the Australian disaster: "It was intended as . . . a Joe Ancis fantasy on the relations between performers and audiences."

Joe Ancis was once, in several authoritative opinions, the funniest man in America, though he could never perform on stage. On frequent occasions in the late forties, at Hanson's luncheonette on Broadway, Ancis would improvise monologues before professional comics, among whom his greatest disciple was Bruce. According to Goldman's history, the main line of Jewish American stand-up passed through Ancis at Hanson's. Ancis would come into the luncheonette and insult the clientele of Jewish comedians—witheringly, unstoppably, profanely. Here is how Goldman describes the reaction.

You're caught in this terrible double-bind. You're loving it! It's killing you!

You're in love with your own death. But you die, apparently, into your assassin, like the son into his consubstantial father:

Doing his famous Spritz with the absolute freedom and self-indulgence and private craziness that you can only get into when you have a listener who is practically another part of your own head, Joe paced the room as nervously as *der Führer* in his bunker. Interior monologue, free association, stream of consciousness—these are the fancy words for the Spritz. (*LB*, 105–9)

The Spritz is where privacy is shared, and bunkers are freedom, and Jews are Nazis, and hatred is beloved. Inclusion repels; repression liberates; aggression bonds. "Stream of consciousness" is accurate, if interiors are exterior, because a "spritz" is a Yiddish spray. "I am going to piss on you" is not merely a Joe Ancis fantasy on the relation of audience to performer, it is *the* Joe Ancis fantasy, the thematization of his form. To feel the joke's aggression without positing an ulterior motive for it—in this aptitude the American audience is superior to the Australian—is precisely to get the



joke, which is the mechanism by which aggression bonds. If the best jokes are metajokes, this joke's superiority derives from its reflection not just on itself but on every joke: the failure of comedian and audience to separate into subject and object produces the emblem of abjection and confluence. (When what seems to be a preamble *to* the joke—"If you've ever seen this bit before, I want you to tell me"—is revised as the setup *of* the joke, the formal politeness of the occasion is folded into the sordid violence of it.) The reward is a quarter of a minute of laughter that, after two seconds, is provoked and reprovoked by the laughter itself: what the audience is finding funny is that it finds this funny.

Only in America did this sort of resentment metamorphose—and it did so regularly—into this sort of consent. The *explanandum* is that scenes like the following never took place in America.

From the second night on [of Bruce's London performances], the fist fights and walkouts were numerous and celebrated. Yevgeny Yevtushenko, John Osborne and Penelope Gilliat walked. Siobhan McKenna, the well-known stage and screen actress, went further. She appeared one evening with a party of eight, including her escort, a nineteen-year-old photographer. The party was loud and hecklish until they decided to walk out in the middle because of "extreme boredom." Peter Cook [of *Beyond the Fringe*] took the trouble to thank them for finally leaving, causing Miss McKenna's escort to grab Cook by his tie and punch his face. Holding his bloodied head, Cook accused Miss McKenna of scratching him. The belligerent actress strode around the downstairs bar, proclaiming in Gaelic bellows, "These hands are clean. They are Irish hands and they are clean." Cook replied, "This is a British face and it is bleeding!" (*LB*, 361)

Though I admire the local ingenuity required to transform Lenny Bruce into an item of antagonism between the British and the Irish, with Bruce in the camp of the beleaguered oppressor, I am not claiming that politics has intruded into the entertainment. Clearly, politics *becomes* the entertainment. The donnybrook staged here is not so much between Ireland and England as between McKenna's hygienic melodrama, her soap opera, and Cook's comedy, in which Bruce's various discharges are transformed into a martyr's blood. When I wonder why scenes like this never occurred in America, I mean only to ask about the facility with which American outrage got trumped by the joke.

Bruce offended Americans, of course, but outside of journalists (outraged to energize their prose), the only expressions of American outrage

were on the part of the legal system, a delegation of moral authority that astounded Englishmen who saw Bruce in the United States. "The words themselves were perhaps less significant," said Brian Glanville, "than the fact that they brought absolutely no protest. Nobody shouted, nobody walked out, let alone threw things" (*LB*, 360). According to Goldman, no member of an American audience ever brought a complaint against Bruce, though he was arrested for obscenity in New York, Chicago, and up and down California. I have tried to define stand-up as a formal phenomenon; now I am trying to describe the cycle of stand-up that began after World War II as a cultural phenomenon. The key to the connection is the geometry of the postwar American suburb.

The clue is what suburbs were invented to leave behind; the clue leads, revealingly, to "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious," specifically to a joke of Heine's—very similar to one of Bruce's—that Freud analyzes twice. Actually, when Freud first turns to it, he is laboring a point concerning the relation of jokes and analogies. Perhaps the "joke," which contrasts Protestant and Catholic clergymen but may have been nondenominationally offensive, is more accurately taxonomized as a witty conceit:

A catholic cleric behaves rather like a clerk with a post in a large business house. The Church, the big firm, of which the Pope is head, gives him a fixed job and, in return, a fixed salary. He works lazily, as everyone does who is not working for his own profit, who has numerous colleagues and can easily escape notice in the bustle of a large concern. . . . A protestant cleric, on the other hand, is in every case his own principal and carries on the business of religion for his own profit. He does not, like his catholic fellow-traders, carry on a wholesale business but only retail. And since he must himself manage it alone, he cannot be lazy. (*SE*, 87)

But then, at the beginning of his discussion of tendentious jokes, placed as if by coincidence immediately after the discussion of analogies, Freud returns to Heine: "When at the end of my last chapter I wrote down Heine's comparison of a catholic priest to an employee in a wholesale business and of a protestant one to a retail merchant, I was aware of an inhibition which was trying to induce me not to make use of the analogy. I told myself that among my readers there would probably be a few who felt respect not only for religion but for its governors and assistants" (*SE*, 90). The question is why, in that case, Freud felt obliged to use the Heine example; evidently, he slipped in the tendentiousness of the joke under cover of a discussion of joke work, exactly the way a comedian slips in tendentiousness under

the cover of the joke work itself. Like all tellers of jokes, on his analysis, Freud needed his joke without knowing why.

At his late Berkeley concert, Bruce tendered the joke in *précis* form: "Catholicism is like Howard Johnson, and what they lease is their franchises."<sup>9</sup> Bruce's literalization of the conceit is probably his best-known routine, "Religions, Inc.," which begins with talk—among Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, other religious superstars, and a Madison Avenue advertising executive—about religious novelties that are expected to sell (cocktail napkins, for one thing, bearing the slogan, "Another martini for Mother Cabrini"), moves on to a worried discussion about how to keep the religion business free of the critical moral issues of the day, and ends with desultory small talk between the advertising executive and the pope, calling by phone. All we hear is the adman's end:

And thanks for the pepperoni. . . . Billy [Graham] wants to know if you'll get him a deal on one of those Dago sports cars. . . . When are you coming to the coast? . . . I can get you on the Sullivan show the 19th. . . . Wear the big ring. . . . Oh, did you see Spellman on Stars of Jazz? . . . Okay, sweetie, yeah, you cool it, too.<sup>10</sup>

Comedically speaking, this does not seem to be arriving much of anywhere. I have, however, left off the final line, which converts all of the foregoing into setup. "No," the agent reassures the pope, "nobody knows you're Jewish." (Big, explosive laugh.) This may seem like a desperate absurdity, a reach for a cheap surprise to end the routine, until you realize, as the audience did at once, that it transforms the skit. No longer anti-Christian, the joke is suddenly anti-Semitic. Or, rather, it allows a moment of anti-Semitism as a stage toward a more general misanthropy, so that the anti-Semitism makes ludicrous its own exclusiveness.<sup>11</sup> (Jews are not particularly venal, because everyone is as venal as a Jew.) It is commonly observed that Bruce portrays the world as show business; the emphasis is equally on the show and the business. Catholic and Protestant celebrities are in religion for the money because tv Christians are secretly show biz Jews.

Return to the Heine/Freud joke—why does Freud need to tell it, even though, as (first) an illustration of a minor technical point, it does not seem half worth the risk of outraging his Christian audience? Does Freud know the real tendency of his tendentiousness? An oddity of "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious" is that it identifies business as the essence not of religion but of jokes as thoroughly as Bergson makes mechanization the essence of the comic. One indication is the proliferation of matchmaker

jokes. When Freud discusses sophisticated humor, he writes as if slightly, but only slightly, puzzled by what is his second set of matchmaker jokes: "It may be due to no more than a whim of chance that all the examples that I shall bring forward of this new group are once more *Schadchen* stories" (SE, 64). Freud returns to *Schadchen* stories a third time, later on, as examples of good jokes all the better for partaking of the "forbidden." This means that the object of the humor, ostensibly the matchmaker sharper, is really the daughter-unloading parents and wife-shoppers (SE, 106-7). It is the business instinct, not as focused and stigmatized in the matchmaker but as pervasive in society, that is the hidden incendiary point of the sub-genre.

Freud has himself, in fact, been describing the workings of the unconscious as business dealings, in terms, when it comes to jokes, of expenditures and savings. At long last the figure becomes explicit:

I may perhaps venture on a comparison between psychical economy and a business enterprise. So long as the turnover in the business is very small, the important thing is that outlay in general shall be kept low and administrative costs restricted to the minimum. . . . Later, when the business has expanded, the importance of the administrative cost diminishes; the height reached by the amount of expenditure is no longer of significance provided that the turnover and profits can be sufficiently increased. . . . Nevertheless it would be wrong to assume that when expenditure was absolutely great there would be no room left for the tendency to economy. The mind of the manager, if it is inclined to economy, will now turn to economy over details. . . . In a quite analogous fashion, in our complex psychical business too, economy in detail remains a source of pleasure. (SE, 156-57)

It might be possible to treat "Jokes" as a joke; at any rate, the Heine example has taught us to see the semblance of a joke in a conceit. If the Heine joke is that religion is a business, if the *Schadchen* joke is that love is a business, the Freudian joke is that jokes are a business. Freud allows Heine to make the point that religion is like a business for Christians; the *Schadchen* stories submit love to Jewish business instincts; but the *Schadchen* stories are pervasive in "Jokes" not, Freud implies, because he or his people are drawn to them generally, but because the penetral of tendentious jokes is less likely to be sex or savagery and more likely to be sales, if what is on the mind of the jokester unconscious is the hope of a bargain. (The meta-joke of Freud's book is the disguising of a lengthy Jewish joke as psychoanalysis.)

This is a set of moves that Bruce makes more concisely—with the economy of a joke—by making a punch line of the pope’s Jewishness, that is, of everyone’s hidden Jewishness.

Bruce was born a suburban, almost a rural, Jew, and came to New York from remote Long Island—to which many Jews after World War II were fleeing New York<sup>12</sup>—to learn at the feet of Joe Ancis what it meant to be a Jewish comedian (*LB*, 75). It meant, in short, to be from the City, and to cherish all the City’s techniques for making money off of sex, celebrity, credulity, art, despair, whatever. (The highlight of Bruce’s failed film about New York was the flea circus at Hubert’s Museum [*LB*, 231–33].) It meant to think of civilization as a scam, and of scams, which Bruce liked to invent, as the paradigm of wit. (A scam is an inverse, absolute bargain: something for nothing.) Bruce’s working hypothesis that a scam is the soul of wit would seem to take literally Freud’s point that the unconscious finds in jokes a psychic bargain; his *donnée* that a scam is the essence of civilization would seem to literalize and radicalize Heine’s point that religion operates like a business. What Bruce wants to make audible, in a voice that fails to distinguish the con artist and the prophet, is the collapse of sacredness into profanity.

It was Bruce’s ambition to inhabit without hypocrisy this abject world whose coming he had announced. The British and Australian audiences who chose not to dwell in it with him—who registered this choice by not getting the joke—were not acting incomprehensibly or irrationally. But to assert that American audiences, on the other hand, got the joke is not to claim that they were more sympathetic to the project: in the 1950s, it was the ambition only of Bruce among American Jews to return from the suburbs to the ethnic city. (Bruce, like Fanny Brice—could he have named himself after her?—had to memorize the little Yiddish he dropped into his act).<sup>13</sup> The flight from the city was an escape for American Jews, as it was a century earlier for American Protestants (around the time our native traditions of humor arose), from the industrialization that was the context of Bergson’s comic and the business—not to mention sex and aggression in unholy conjunction with business—that was the basis of Freud’s jokes. The flight from industry and business and money and filth—the flight, in sum, to suburban civility, the essence of which is the treatment of the fount or funding of cleanliness as excrement—is not exactly a flight from jokes but, more exactly, a flight from the power of jokes, their tendentious origins. This is what American audiences were trying to effect.

The first defense against Bruce—not participating in the transmuting of his offensiveness into humor—is to treat his act, in effect, as pure urban

squalor. To get the joke, however, is not to join Bruce in his wallowing; it is to revel in the transformative power of joke work, like the transformative power of money. The joke work does not annihilate the abandoned repulsiveness of the city. It commutes it on behalf of a commuting society, which endeavors, for the sake of lawns and laundered cash, to leave behind profanity and, in the process, also the sacred. Thus society has enacted its abjection, and Bruce is its returning filth, alienable, like the tendentious meaning of jokes, but not quite alienated.

The audience—by means of its laughter, by means of its metalaughter—comes together as a community, under this pressure, to assert its right not to do community work. (It demands to be outraged in order not to be outraged.) Joke work does the work of suburbanization, since the moral method of suburbia is to note, collect, yet trivialize all offenses. This is not to say, according to M. P. Baumgartner, that suburban provocations are trivial per se, rather that they “appear trivial to an observer precisely because their victims react with such restraint”—they laugh them off, in other words.<sup>14</sup> Suburbanites, like stand-up audiences, effect the lightness of their being.

Why should the law in that case be moved to action? It would seem to have prosecuted Bruce on nobody’s behalf.<sup>15</sup> The only answer is that the law acted on its own behalf, precisely because it represented no one. In 1964, while one of Bruce’s obscenity trials was in progress, the Supreme Court ruled that “contemporary community standards” of decency could not refer to a particular community, but would have to refer, since a constitutional right was in question, to the nation. This is not to imagine, of course, that there *were* no subnational communities. Nevertheless, the Supreme Court established that the law could posit a fictional community for the purpose of being outraged by obscenity, in the absence of a real community that had the constitutional authority to do so, and the question is: why bother? If there is no real outraged community whose outrage legally counts, why pretend there is? Insofar as national restoration after World War II might have involved fashioning just such a fictional community, outrage might have defined it; but another America was being fabricated, and its principal was not the community but the audience, which means not outrage but entertainment. I have defined artistic seriousness as recourse to retroactive judgment, and in what remains of this essay I want to show that that capacity for judging is precisely what the laughter of audiences puts in jeopardy for the legal system. The discussion will eventually produce the last clue to the entertainment value of the urination joke.

I cannot come close to reproducing or even mapping the miasma of

Bruce's trials and hearings and legal negotiations. I want only to discuss perhaps the most bizarre legal moment out of many. A prosecuting attorney named Albert Wollenberg Jr., in the San Francisco trial, found himself obsessed with disputing the humorous content of a particularly graphic word from one of Bruce's routines, which I, pure child of the fifties and suburban diaspora, shall refuse for this chapter to write, but which Bruce, in a later routine, replaced with "blah blah blah," as I shall here. On the stand was Lou Gottlieb, a San Francisco jazz critic, folksinger, and hip intellectual, and the testimony went as follows:

Wollenberg: You say that the main theme of Mr. Bruce is to get laughter.

Gottlieb: That is the professional comedian's duty.

Wollenberg: I see. And do you see anything funny in the word [blah blah blah]?

Gottlieb: To answer that question "yes" or "no" is impossible, Your Honor.

Judge Horn: You may answer it "yes" or "no" and then explain your answer.

Gottlieb: I found it extremely unfunny as presented by Mr. Wollenberg, I must say.

Judge Horn: All right, wait a minute, wait a minute! (*LB*, 352)

The moment is loony—it is difficult to avoid the sensation that the trial is enacting a Lenny Bruce routine, and when Bruce in fact turned it into a routine, the joke was how often the judge and prosecutor, like F. Lee Bailey with his "N" word, contrived excuses for pronouncing "blah blah blah." Wollenberg's hapless premise is that the obscene word cannot have a function in a funny routine because the word is not itself funny. This is puzzling, but we can divine what prompts Wollenberg to this paralogism. If the audience laughs, Wollenberg must believe, then either the performance is, so to speak, *above* obscenity (it has artistic merit), or it is *other than* obscenity (an amused audience is not a prurient one). The problem, however, is not merely that Wollenberg did not need to grant either of these points. It may even be the case that Wollenberg made his own job more difficult by not acknowledging that the converse is more plausible: that if Bruce's diction is not funny, conceivably it is serious; aesthetic or political impulses may determine his vulgarity. An obscene comedian may use a dirty word for a laugh, but why should a comedian choose *not* to be funny?

It does not become evident why Wollenberg must of necessity pursue this dangerous line, in fact, until Gottlieb makes his joke, and Judge Horn

suppresses the courtroom auditors', now suddenly the courtroom audience's, laughter. The inevitability of the tactic is not visible until Gottlieb displays its disastrous consequences, the disaster being that the law has itself become part of the comedy. Gottlieb makes horribly manifest the reciprocal clarity of the duel that had, I think, enticed Wollenberg. Since humor is context-dependent, the law seeks to take its elements out of context, which is both a desperate and a plausible strategy, since retroactive judgment must be context-free. Gottlieb, after resisting this strategy for a moment, proves that the endeavor itself makes the law comic, which is to say that contextual flatfootedness is precisely the job qualification of the straight man. We can infer that nothing less than humor itself is on trial, and that the parry works to put judgment itself on stage. Wollenberg denies that Lenny Bruce's obscene word is funny, and Horn cannot admit that Wollenberg has unwittingly provided useful empirical evidence that, in the perfectly supplied comic context, it is, because they sense that in laughter's presence there can be "no process that resembles judging."

This would be the simple closure of the essay, if it were only the case that Gottlieb functioned as Bruce's surrogate, that he was making Bruce's point, that Bruce was in his own act looking to unleash the humor of dirtiness that sanctimony itself produced. That, however, would turn Bruce's comedy absolute, and the interest of Bruce's case from the theoretical view is that the ideal structure of comedy—expressed in Gottlieb's phrase as the "professional comedian's duty"—always frustrated his efforts to be outrageous. Bruce was an indulged son whose biography as a comedian reads like a vain attempt not to overthrow the law but, by threatening it, to bring it into play. Bruce's pathetic letter to his father, written when Bruce was about forty, apparently about to go to jail for narcotics, tells half the truth. "Dear Father," it begins. "This is the story of a boy and his father who spoiled him." Bruce goes on to sketch a melodrama in which the spoiled boy ascends from brat to thief to murderer until he is caught and sentenced to die. The final words of the letter are spoken not by his alter ego but by Bruce (the shocking pronoun shift veils the penal anticlimax): "I'm going to jail tomorrow because you spoiled me" (*LB*, 87–88).

The letter is misleading. Its ostensible point is that an indulged son believes he deserves pleasure without labor, so turns to crime, which eventually fails to pay. Yet the interest of the story is that every filial outrage ("I don't want this cheap old bike") inspires nothing in the father except a patience that is not so much forgiving (it does not recognize the outrage to forgive it) as disengaged. ("Alright [*sic*], my son, I'll work 24 hours a day and get you a nice one.") The spoiled son turns to crime not for its promise



of unearned satisfactions, but because only the law—in the world of suburban fatherhood—is capable of antagonism. Bruce does not want something for nothing, the motive of the thief and, taken to absolute ideals, of the businessman and comedian. He wants something at any cost, or, rather, he wants cost itself. The son's last gesture toward his father is made on the way to the electric chair: "Come here father, I want to whisper something to you." The formality of "father" adumbrates a confession, but the son bites off his father's ear. The son's violence both precludes hearing and is a literalization of metaphors of being heard: the father lends his son an ear; the son chews his father's ear off.

On the other hand, judges hear evidence and grant hearings. So Bruce turned every judge into a father, and every legal performance into an opportunity to seduce and poison the paternal ear. "I so desperately want your respect," Bruce says to a Judge Murtagh, and Goldman comments: "It was an oedipal nightmare, the whole scene—Lenny back again in his childhood, pleading, cajoling, placating, trying desperately to avert the punishment meted out by his sternly disciplinarian father" (*LB*, 490–91). I gather, however, that the father was not disciplinarian enough; the impulse was as self-incriminating as self-serving. What behavior would have been better calculated to *preclude* respect?

A paradox turned up by joke research is that

early attempts to seek attention, affection, and emotional support from adults, along with frequent requests for help on tasks and recognition seeking for achievement-related behaviors were . . . positively related to frequency of humor-related behaviors for both sexes. . . . Thus, in spite of their dominating and generally assertive style of interaction with peers, young humorists had a history of being especially sensitive to adult reactions and appeared to gear much of their behavior to getting some kind of positive reaction from adults. This was accompanied (among boys) by a tendency to be highly conforming to adult demands.<sup>16</sup>

Stand-up, this suggests, begins with aggression toward an audience in order to submit that aggression to the law, which it hopes to mollify. The progress is to convert Audience to Law for the purpose of winning the Law back as Audience. I intend this description as formal and generic: what is being negotiated is the terms on which the stand-up setting will be organized. (If Law is convened to be expelled, then we *have*, in absolute terms, a stand-up setting.) The comedian works from above his audience (audience seated, comedian doing "stand-up"); he looks down on them as upon

children and lectures them. But they make his jokes into jokes, or refuse to, by a reaction that is more final, less appealable, than a judgment. He wishes to humiliate them and they submit; but they think he is childish for craving their unchallengeable approval so desperately, and he knows this. There are child singers, child dancers, child actors, but no child stand-ups: an actual child would block this vacillating infantilism.<sup>17</sup>

My natural father was born around the same time as Lenny Bruce; he was suburban and spoiled; he was wild (he subscribed to *Mad Magazine* in the fifties, when suburban lawlessness had to be sublimated as crazy humor); he died, about to move the family closer to the factory where he worked, at around the same age as Lenny Bruce. When it became conscious to me that I was identifying Lenny Bruce with my father, I found myself combing for evidence in Bruce's features; only momentarily did it come to me that I had selected the police photograph of Lenny Bruce dead.

My daughter was born in 1990, a few years after Herbert Blau's daughter, invoked at the beginning of his book, *The Audience*. Blau tells us that she "expects an audience under any circumstances," adding that "a lingering question of the book, indebted to her, has to do with why, as one grows older, that simple expectation shouldn't continue to be so."<sup>18</sup> My daughter is already too old now to assume my constant attention. Laughter is the best she can get out of me: not continuous absorption, but perfect invaluable absorption for the length of the joke and response. When I try to transform myself from Audience to Law, the crisis of suburban parenthood, next to impossible now in America-the-audience, I do so by withholding laughter, since all her outrages, by the logic of the naïve, are comic. "The naïve (in speech) agrees with jokes as regards wording and content: it brings about a misuse of words, a piece of nonsense, or a piece of smut" (*SE*, 185). Only one person (not in speech) has ever urinated on me; I laughed. She did not pay for her outrage. Her crime, by an alchemical plea bargain, paid.

I have tried to infer what is most abject in comedy (the city and its commercial filth, the body and its excrement) from its angelic geometry (the theorems of the indivisibility of performer and audience), and this is the largest tenet of the Euclidean faith: from two points (comedian and crowd) of the stand-up circle diametrically opposed, stand-up is the resurrection of your father as your child.



For many of the many of us who were coming into or passing through adolescence at the beginning of the sixties, Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks were an initiation; Reiner's extemporaneous interviews with the 2000 Year Old Man and other Brooks characters were a shibboleth of comic sensibility, when comic sensibility was *most* of sensibility.<sup>1</sup> Johnny Carson was a similar case to a lesser degree. No one doubted that Carson's jokes were an evolutionary advance on Bob Hope's, and it was a revelation that the approach to and retreat from jokes could be funnier than punch lines. But Carson still worked within or, more impressively, around the edifice of the joke. What Brooks did with Reiner was create humor whose syntax no one could parse. Years later, nostalgic fans of academic persuasion could satisfy

themselves that the humor of Brooks and Reiner fit none of the paradigms erected by joke analysts.

As an experiment, ask anyone who can recite the classic Brooks-Reiner routines, and who once thought of humor as a sign of grace, to identify the defining passage of all “The 2000 Year Old Man” records. Here is the consensus answer. Reiner says, “I think most people would be interested in leading a long and fruitful life.” Brooks answers (before Reiner has formulated a question):

Fruit is good, you mention fruit. Fruit kept me going 140 years when I was on a very strict diet.

Mainly nectarines—I love that fruit. Half a peach, half a plum, so it’s a hell of a fruit. [big laugh]

Not too hot, not too cold, you know, just nice. [halcyon moment]

Even a rotten one is good [big laugh]—that’s how much I love them. I’d rather have a rotten nectarine than a fine plum, what do you think of that? [big, startled laugh]

“The 2000 Year Old Man” is one of the classic bits of the first era of contemporary stand-up—which is one of the most powerful if least investigated forms of postmodernist expression<sup>2</sup>—and the essence of contemporary stand-up is inexplicable, context- and comedian-specific, humor, not the Bob Hope joke, expropriable by Milton Berle, dear to joke analysts. Nevertheless, if Mel Brooks, along with Lenny Bruce and a few others, is a harbinger of postmodern comedy, insofar as he does not deal in gags, still it is the case that comedy cannot be formless, since comedy is deformity that is self-measuring.<sup>3</sup> Thus the nectarine, not because it is rotten but because its decadence is contemplated and desired by a brilliantly formal mind, can serve as the emblem of the comedy of our time.

Brooks begins with a pun on “fruitful” that is so weak as not to be a pun at all, but rather a literalization; to put it precisely, it is a weak pun whose humor is that it counterindicates a literal rather than punning disposition. This is followed by an attempt to loop the newly literalized issue of fruit back to the general theme of the sketch, since there is a modicum, maybe, of humor purely in the longevity (“Fruit kept me going 140 years”) of a peculiar diet. Brooks is waiting for his inspiration; when it comes, it is revolutionary. “Mainly nectarines,” he cries, suddenly invigorated. “I love that fruit. Half a peach, half a plum, so it’s a hell of a fruit.” What revolutionary thing, exactly, has happened?

First, it flashes on Brooks that something about the nectarine once felt

as uncanny as a dream to him (I divine this): to be in the presence of the mongrel fruit was to be in the neighborhood of a mystery, arithmetically apprehensible yet ontologically obscure. What occurs to Brooks, in the moment that is granted an improvising comedian to make a decision, is that still to be charged as an adult by the childhood equivalent of Pythagorean knowledge would be funny, slightly more so if the adult is two thousand years from his nonage. “So it’s a hell of a fruit” caps this impulse of the bit. “Hell of a” insists on the language of hoary appreciation (“helluva” might better capture the flatness of expression) in the transfiguring presence of a really childish enthusiasm, partly sensuous and partly taxonomic.

Note that “half a peach, half a plum, so it’s a hell of a fruit” also takes the form of a fractured, fractional computation. And justifying the pronouncement is a piece of deduction. Vaguely in the background is some dubious major premise: sums of positives are positive.

The point is that taxonomy, syllogism, and ratio have been deployed on behalf of an irrational craving; you feel restored to the moment of gathering adulthood when corporeal pleasures were enhanced by the allure of esoteric rationales. Thereupon Brooks tries this measured discrimination: “Not too cold, not too hot, you know, just nice.” This is not very funny, though it is sweet. The joke on moderation—the joke that extravagance here takes the *form* of moderation—is easier to admire than laugh at; the temperateness of nectarines, as opposed to their tempered parentage, is not an important datum for children or, therefore, memory for adults. There is, I believe, *some* humor in this respite. I find myself pleased to register that “just nice” replaces “just right” in the evocation of “Goldilocks.” “Just nice” has the feel of off-English, the language of first-generation immigrants telling fables to their grandchildren, with the result that the structure “not extreme, not extreme, perfect mean” is nudged from dead center. Still, the balance of this line is mainly set up for the final extravagance.

Even a rotten one is good—that’s how much I love them. I’d rather have a rotten nectarine than a fine plum, what do you think of that?

This is where the audience finds itself most inexplicably amused. But, on analysis, the methodicalness of the dithyramb is perfectly in keeping with the characteristic humor of the bit. Brooks is at this point in the midst of such a sacred remembrance that he approaches rapture.

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.  
If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.

Both comedian and psalmist are attempting to measure the lost immeasurable. Brooks is funnier insofar as the incommensurable preference seems to demand an abstraction (Jerusalem above chief joy) but gets expressed as a seemingly unremarkable concretion (nectarine above plum) that nevertheless has, for him, equal force.

The reason that Brooks says “fine plum” and not “fine peach” is that “plum” is a funnier word to land on: its abruptness sounds right in Brooks’s Yiddish accent, and brings out, by comparison, the disproportionate vigor with which Brooks enunciates the prissier “nectarine.” The rottenness of the amalgamated, interpolated nectarine—pronounced with Hebraic inflection and masculine emphasis despite its Hellenic etymology and weak suffix—makes it multiply liminal, multiply irrational, multiply non-Kosher. The audience is laughing already at “fine plum,” partly because “fine” replaces “ripe” (as “nice” replaced “right”) barely to warp the symmetry toward Old World evaluative decisiveness, but “what do you think of that?” prolongs its delight. Brooks’s recollected joy has suddenly galled him to a minor belligerence in the presence of those who are not necessarily infected by the holy contagion of his memory—

Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones

—though the joke’s bathos is not merely of sacred Jerusalem and profane nectarine, but also of lost Jerusalem and available nectarine (comically revivable from nonage to dotage): a nectarine has the taste of nectar, necros + tar, a little death-conqueror, like the 2000 Year Old Man himself.

If the appeal of comedy may be traced to its imposition of geometrical perfectionism on compounded liminality (so that nonthinkers cannot enjoy comedy—“the world is . . . a tragedy to those that feel”—but mathematicians can only appreciate obvious humor), then the nectarine joke is the essence of what is funny, folly of follies. The funniest jokes are meta-jokes, so this routine ought to seem, and does to many cognoscenti seem, like the very essence of humor in its rational exorbitance, pure rottenness, immortal profanity, exalted abjection.

Nevertheless, formal considerations when they are exclusive are always an evasion, and no one will be convinced by this prolegomenon that I have captured, in terms of mathematics or the perversion of mathematics, what makes Brooks and Reiner—only them—unstealably funny. I shall not be able to manage *that*, but I can do something toward understanding the particular *appeal* of their peculiar humor.

i.

Exclusively formal considerations are an evasion: what am I (and insofar as I am accurately representing their pseudogeometry, what are Brooks and Reiner) evading? The pertinent expert here would be Eve Sedgwick who, in virtuoso readings of *Dorian Gray* and "The Beast in the Jungle," scorns the "alibi of abstraction"—the reduction of content to kitsch and the elevation of formal self-consciousness to the summit of high art—as a function of the quarantining of homosexuality from early modernism.<sup>4</sup> If, as I hypothesize, the attractiveness of comedy is in the disturbance of its own compulsive formalism, it ought to intrigue queer theory; if a psychological study of fifty-five leading comedians in 1975 revealed that none of them was homosexual, which cannot mean more than that none was willing to be taken as homosexual, despite the high visibility of homosexuals elsewhere in show business, then comedy is perhaps a sort of institutionalization of "The Beast in the Jungle."<sup>5</sup> Consider what Reiner nominates in an interview as "pure Mel." Brooks is portraying a small but undefeated Jewish wrestler, who wins his matches by shocking opponents with "soul kisses." Asked if he is a homosexual, Brooks replies, "No, I have a wife!" What is the difference between kissing her and kissing a wrestler? "My wife is the only one I know who kisses from the inside out." This bit is "pure Mel," Reiner believes, not as the rococo intertwining of latency and blatancy, not, furthermore, as having anything to do with *him*, but rather as a "joke so wild it was almost abstract."<sup>6</sup>

Reiner's premise that abstraction is what appears as the end result of wildness is no doubt borrowed from contemporary abstract expressionism; he might with equal justice have observed that Brooks's bit is almost abstract because it is almost geometric. Reiner wants Brooks to arrive at abstraction, but the erotics of the routine begins with it. (It is a joke so abstract, it is almost wild.) The abstraction is the one that Sedgwick herself begins with, and revolves so much that it gets conic: the triangle, René Girard's to begin with, by which Girard reduces all desire to a communion of rivals over an object regarded only secondarily.<sup>7</sup> Sedgwick's gambit is to link Girard's triangular desire to Gayle Rubin's triangulation of political power, which itself superimposes Lévi-Strauss on Freud;<sup>8</sup> thus Sedgwick has a mechanism for getting from erotics to social structure. Girard's triangle involves no exclusive determination of the sex of its three points, but Rubin attempts to demonstrate that patriarchal triangles concern the trafficking in women as tokens of male association. Sedgwick can therefore identify her feminism with her analysis of male-male relationships:

the first premise of queer theory is that male homosocial desire may be homosexual or homophobic, but that in any case it triangulates women. In this structural synthesizing dwells the theoretical possibility of representing a “homosocial” continuum from homosexuality to homophobia, with sensitivity to how the continuum is practically and politically demarcated as the telltale feature of an epoch.

It is easier, probably, to sense the presence of buried, Girardian triangles in male-female relationships than in male-male relationships, and easier in both of these than in female-female ones. In ordinary heterosexual relationships, the inferiority of the woman’s position makes it simple to intuit that another passion might be stronger, because it is more mutually charged, and the omnipresence in fiercely heterosexual societies of ferocious homosocial rituals bears the intuition out. It is somewhat less clear why male homosexual relationships need to detour through women (or why they need to detour at all, unless you share Girard’s monomania), though Sedgwick’s observation that some patriarchal societies have been homosocial and openly homoerotic, whereas others have been homosocial and homophobic, does suggest that the same dynamic is likely to be at work. Least clear is whether lesbian relationships must be triangular, since there is no matriarchy to be kept in place by subordinating a man in a structure that is not primarily for or about him.

Some theorizing in Sedgwick’s wake has been designed in part to clarify just these puzzles, for example, that of Wayne Koestenbaum (a Sedgwick admirer) and Terry Castle (a critic). If it is not obvious, in a culture where homosexuality is valued, why homosexual desire must triangulate women, nevertheless Koestenbaum brilliantly elaborates the benefits of doing so in a culture that is homophobic. Koestenbaum treats *The Waste Land*, for example, as the issue of a determined effort to manufacture and master the hysterical female body between Eliot and Pound, for the sake of keeping their literary homosociality untainted. Unless we posit that there is in some sense a hysterical female already in Eliot’s homoerotic psyche, prior to its objectification for the sake of heterosexuality as *The Waste Land*—a hypothesis intimated by Koestenbaum but at best only weakly triangular in implication—then it is by a heroic, if pathological, determination that heterosexuality and patriarchy produce a detour from a relationship that was originally linear.<sup>9</sup> This narrative of the effortful securing of triangulated females, or their surrogates, follows quite closely, in fact, from Sedgwick’s version of affective Realpolitik in, for example, Dickens.

The purpose and method of triangulation are even more peculiar in the relationships conjured by Terry Castle, who wishes to rectify the mar-



ginality of lesbianism in Sedgwick's work. First, Castle premises that the scandal lurking in patriarchal triangles is that "the two male terms might hook up directly, so to speak, replacing the heterosexual with an explicitly homosexual dyad." "Dyad" here seems only to refer to the connecting of two (of still extant three) triangular points; still, "directly" seems to dismiss, in the case of homosexuality only, the third point. "So to speak" (modifying "directly"?) reclouds the issue; but then Castle suggests that in "*lesbian bonding . . . the two female terms indeed merge and the male term drops out.*"<sup>10</sup> Why should it not, one might muse—there is no matriarchy to prop up. This is an evolution of linear (and, depending on how seriously she means "merge," punctual) desire out of triangular desire that seems and does not seem to be descended from Sedgwick.

Heterosexuality may be read, in Koestenbaum, as the adding of a third term to homosexual dyads; homosexuality may be read, in Castle, as the subtracting of a third term from heterosexual triads. The relevance of this numerology to my concerns derives from the coincidence that the structure of a "tendentious" joke, in Freud, either begins with a heterosexual dyad (insistent man, resistant woman) and adds a third term, another man, potential rival, for the sake of civilizing the excitations of smut, or begins with a male-male dyad (powerful man, weak man) and adds a third term, again another man, for the sake of defusing aggression. Only the first case seems to require a woman; even on that model, however, the heterosexuality of the event, at any rate, drops out in upper-class joking. The female object of smut, who is supposed to be excited by it, actually cannot appear.

Thus the smutty joke repeats the form of Castle's homosexuality, triad degenerating into dyad, only one sex remaining, except that the point of the joke is ostensibly heterosexual. The aggressive joke would repeat the form of Koestenbaum's homosexuality, dyad masked by triad, except that the male-male competition that it begins with is not thought to sublimate desire.<sup>11</sup> All you need is the concept of homosociality to get from Freud's joke theory to queer theory. What jokes traditionally do—on Freud's hypothesis as queer theory might revise it—is insist on triangulation for the sake of masking homoerotics.

This is why homosexuals have had a difficult time making comedy as much their domain as all other aspects of show business: the skeleton of homosocial society collapses at the imputation that joking is not the civilizing of heterosexual rivalry (over women, for dominance). Joking may represent a sort of hinge in society that allows the door to swing: close it, and desire can triangulate heterosexually; open it, and desire might lineate.

I put the matter in hopelessly abstract terms—in terms of triangles and

lines, twos and threes—partly in order to arrive at Barbara Johnson’s celebrated essay, “The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida,” an interloper in the French theoretical rivalry (within the story and without) over “The Purloined Letter.” It would be possible to make the case—having pushed to abstraction so pure that any unwanted content must be visibly expelled—that homosexuality is the masked theme of that essay, that Johnson’s fashioning of herself as judgmental third party of a male-male rivalry is a clever upending of the patriarchal triangle to find humor in the homosexual panic of Lacan and Derrida’s homosocial competition for Poe.<sup>12</sup> What I want to emphasize is that Derrida accuses Lacan of a reassuring commitment to threes, as opposed to the spookily multiplied duplications of “The Purloined Letter,” on behalf of an oedipal triangle the object of which, as Rubin remarked two decades ago, is to assure the reproduction of heterosexuality. On Derrida’s argument, three becomes the number of balance and normality while, in Johnson’s terms, “the numbers 2 and 4 have become uncannily odd.” This remark is in a section of her essay called—now we are prepared to get the joke—“Odd Couples.” I shall attempt to make good on the allusion, odd enough in this rarefied setting, to popular American comedy.

## ii.

When I was a kid, comedy teams were integral to comedy, though today they are virtually extinct. (At this juncture the essay gets slightly autobiographical in hopes of becoming cultural and historical.) Some comedy teams comprised a man and a woman: Nichols and May, preeminently, or their middlebrow equivalents, Stiller and Meara. But almost all were male-male: Wayne and Shuster (frequently on the Ed Sullivan Show), Burns and Schreiber (beleaguered taxi driver and barking fare), Rowan and Martin (whose doctor routine, a staple of comedy-team humor, won me to them in advance of their epochal tv show), Peter Cook and Dudley Moore from *Beyond the Fringe*, the great Bob and Ray, the creepy Smothers Brothers, Brooks and Reiner. Other comedy pairs—not quite stand-up teams—included Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon (starting on *The Tonight Show* in 1962) or Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin from just after the war.

My adolescent ambition, never entirely jettisoned, was to hang around the funniest person I knew. In high school, my talent for inciting the funniest person I knew was sufficiently developed that several adults suggested that we practice to become a professional comedy team, a suggestion no one would offer since, let us estimate, 1973. I never knew anyone else to

confess to harboring that kind of ambition until I heard Carl Reiner admit to it. In the fifties, the funniest man in the world was Sid Caesar, to whom Reiner played second banana; starting in the late seventies, it was Steve Martin, whom Reiner directed; in between (there was some overlap, but Reiner is serially monogamous in his account), he brought Mel Brooks to comedy altitudes that, on his own, Brooks has never subsequently scaled.<sup>13</sup> Why were the fifties and early sixties a breeding ground—adults providing role models for kids who would grow up into a world in which there was no such role—for this strange calling?

I note that in male-male comedy teams, one partner is, insofar as we take reassurance inferring sexuality from appearance and gender, blatantly heterosexual. He is often conspicuously brawnier than his partner: Ray Goulding, Ed McMahon, Carl Reiner. He has a deeper or more even-keeled voice. He is either steadier, as if prime material for bourgeois husbandhood (Dick Smothers, Dan Rowan, Carl Reiner), or he may be flamboyantly a woman's man (Dean Martin). About the sexuality of the other member of the pair—Tom Smothers or Dick Martin or Mel Brooks or Jerry Lewis—one might believe almost anything except that his sexual life was presented to him as a no-strings inheritance.

I might mention along these lines another quasi-comedy team: Tony Randall and Jack Klugman, tv embodiment of Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple*, source of Barbara Johnson's rubric. Neil Simon was a writer for Sid Caesar along with Brooks, and *The Odd Couple* may have been inspired, Kenneth Tynan suggests, by the postconnubial housekeeping of Brooks and a friend named Speed Vogel.<sup>14</sup> Randall plays a photographer, an amateur interior decorator, an opera lover. Klugman, messier, cigar smoking, poker playing, writes sports. Because of marital problems, they have become roommates indefinitely, so that no third term mediates either their mutual aggressiveness or their mutual amusement (without a third term, the former is not so much the repressed of the latter as its form). It goes without saying that one is typed heterosexual, the other homosexual—what would you call such a pairing? Not straight couple; not queer couple; the third possibility, in between, sui generis, is "odd couple," pronounced oddly, on its way from spondee to dactyl, as if there were such a thing.

In comedy lingo, the sober member of the team is referred to as the "straight man." I have never heard what the other is called. In Nichols-May and Stiller-Meara, there is no invariant division of labor; in male-male teams, roles are almost always strictly defined, except that one role is unlabeled. This is the laugh that dare not speak its name.

What name would it speak if it dared? It will not divulge its sexual name,

but it has spoken its racial epithet. Call Reiner not “straight man” but “interlocutor,” and Brooks becomes “endman”—Bones or Tambo. What Brooks plays into, by means of his literalistic swerve on “fruitful,” is the whole history of ethnic or race humor (for example, “Dutch” or “Hebe” or, as in the case of Weber and Fields, Dutch and Hebe indistinguishably), whose enduring example is the minstrel team of Huck and Jim.<sup>15</sup>

“What did you speculate in, Jim?”

“Well, fust I tackled stock.”

“What kind of stock?”

“Why, live stock. Cattle, you know. I put ten dollars in a cow.”<sup>16</sup>

Jim’s last sentence is in 2000-Year-Old-Man rhythm, pulling up short on “cow” (cf., “I’d rather have a rotten nectarine than a fine plum”). The humor is in the arrival at the unremarkable and embodied in place of the climactic and ideal. Huck, of course, unlike Reiner, does not know better. The running joke is that even when he does, it gives him no advantage. That Solomon, for example, was “the wisest man” is known to Huck: “the widow she told me so.” Huck’s received wisdom, however, cannot withstand Jim’s literal-minded critique—“what use is a half a chile?”—of Solomon’s famous threat.<sup>17</sup>

In the same way, it is no benefit to Reiner (in “2000 and One”) to have received, also at secondhand, the conviction of Shakespeare’s literary supremacy: “It was reputed, and I guess you agree,” Reiner says to Brooks, “that he was the greatest writer of all time.” Brooks does not agree, going so far as to improvise an unknown play of Shakespeare’s, “Queen Alexandra and Murray,” as a burlesque confrontation of Elizabethan gibberish and deflationary Yinglish. It turns out, though, that Brooks does not base his condescension toward Shakespeare on the existence of this play. Shakespeare was a “cute man and a pussycat,” Brooks remembers, impugning his canonicity and his heterosexuality at a stroke, but he wrote very poorly. “With an ‘l’ that looked like a ‘t.’ With an ‘m’ you didn’t know if it was an ‘n.’ An ‘o’ could be a ‘p.’ Every letter was cockeyed and crazy. Don’t tell me he was a good writer; he had the worst penmanship I ever saw in my life.”

In the Solomon colloquy, Jim is guilty of misreading, of not, more precisely, registering what he had heard as a text to be read, and Brooks is guilty of not registering what he *saw* as a text to be read. Still, the twin jokes are not entirely on them, since, for their part, Huck and Reiner are incapable of any defense at all of the virtue of the Bible and Shakespeare, as against what Jim heard and the 2000 Year Old Man saw. To be ignorant, in vernacular art, is to be clever; Brooks’s failure to comprehend

the two meanings of “writer”—like his reduction of the two meanings of “fruitful”—comes off as a kind of illiterate, inverse, superior pun. When Jim misses the point of the Solomon story, and Brooks misses the Shakespearean oeuvre altogether, except for one addendum, they threaten literature itself, at the source.

I infer from this vernacular canonicide that Twain and Brooks are not entirely outside the objects of their fun. If Twain begins his book with an insider’s boastfulness concerning the accuracy of his ear even for slave talking, the implicit accuracy of Brooks’s routine is partly in its demonstration of his inner ear for ethnic *hearing*.<sup>18</sup> As audience, we not only hear how the 2000 Year Old Man speaks; we hear how he hears. Like dialogue in Henry James—“The Beast in the Jungle” may be the paradigm—conversation in Brooks and Reiner proceeds by misunderstanding. In James, characters fend off the perfection of privacy by the delicacy of their misprisions; Brooks keeps his comic energy stimulated by *indelicate* approximation, by misplaced concreteness. He is in this way Schopenhauerian, since, for Schopenhauer, comedy is the revenge of the sensuous on the abstract.<sup>19</sup>

“I think most people would be interested in leading a long and fruitful life,” prompts Reiner, and Brooks misses the pedigree of the cliché—what had he taken the biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply to mean? From fruitfulness to fruit is one step in the specifying, from fruit to nectarines, the next. The process seems harmless. Yet what is threatening in the *content* of the comedy is its testimonial to cross-pollination, the human equivalents of which would include intermarriage and miscegenation. Could an audience in 1960 not, at least subliminally, hear in a reference to mixed fruitfulness an allusion to mixed marriage? And still more threatening is Reiner’s impotence to stave off Brooks’s mistake. In Brooks’s (literally) immortal tribute to an (etymologically) immortal fruit is simply more verbal power than Reiner himself can muster. The weakness of the ethnic ear for English is converted into triumph.

If we leave the matter there, we will have analyzed an insurrection, however local and verbal, rather than comedy—but if comedy performs a useful task for theory it is all in the reduction to nonsense of the distinction between containment and subversion models of art. The truth is that the swerve from fruitfulness to fruit is not a complete victory for ethnic literalness and physicality, since Brooks has eschewed not merely the dead term *fruitful* but also its signified: reproductive heterosexuality. What has occurred is, in effect, the substitution of one form of (encrypted) sensuousness for another, oral for vaginal, to put the matter schematically. Thus we may decrypt in Brooks’s passion for nectarines an attraction to the giddy

indivisibility of prissy peach and macho plum, and to its decadent deliciousness ("even a rotten one is good"). The secret knowledge of nectarines, I guessed earlier, was part taxonomic and part sensuous; it displaces the secret knowledge of homosexuality. This knowledge, however, must remain secret, which means that to replace fruitfulness with fruit is to keep the dead language of heterosexuality buried, but to image decadent orality as the eating of nectarines is not to allow the galvanizing discourse of homosexuality to surface.

Amalgamation is threatened when any repressed ethnicity appears on stage; this is the heterosexual worry of male performance. You might have thought that the diversion from compulsory fruitfulness would only magnify audience discomfort. In fact, the two horrors cancel each other, as Leslie Fiedler demonstrated in 1960, the year of "The 2000 Year Old Man." (My assertion that sensing miscegenation in an apparently natural nostalgia would have been unavoidable in 1960 is partly based on conceiving of Fiedler as a crystallization of his era.) But the demand of American men, in the presence of their most unremitting racial and sexual anxieties, is for more than local, vacillating distraction. The interference of these anxieties always entails, as Fiedler showed, a retreat to childhood; we may infer that the privileged form of obliviousness is the joke, which in Freud begins (though it does not end) in a prolongation of lost, ludic, childhood freedom.<sup>20</sup>

The fact remains that we are witnessing, in the case of Brooks and Reiner, two Jews, one more suburbanized and Americanized than the other, in uxorious harmony. Male anxiety cannot utterly disappear into the joke, however abstract; it keeps reappearing, embodied or at least voiced. The result is that Brooks must do male listeners the favor of representing the very threat they wish to wish away—his humor does not so much conjure it away as quarantine it. The model here is minstrelsy as Eric Lott describes it, in which the attribution of all loose homoeroticism to the blackface performer discharges the fear of miscegenation and the fear of homosexuality at once: thus the gratification, the release, the wild laugh. "Oh, Sally is de gal for me," went the blackface song, "I would'nt hab no udder / if Sally dies to-morrow night, / I'll marry Sally's brudder."<sup>21</sup>

To Lott, the "joking triangle, in which white men share a dominative relationship to a black man which is based above all on looking seems . . . the northern analogue of black men on the auction block."<sup>22</sup> This is a racial variation on Freud's smut triangle, in which two men share a laugh over a woman, who in upper-class joking cannot be present. In the case of minstrelsy, the white men who are sharing the joke are (presumably, since the

joking triangle requires a joke teller and joke recipient) the blackface comedian and his audience; the object of the joke (insofar as the relationship is based “above all on looking”) is also the blackface comedian, standing in for the absent black man himself. This too has resonance in the case of Reiner-Brooks, since Brooks, though Jewish, is playing a Jew, whose old world Yiddish accent is not quite Brooks’s own.

Then what of Reiner? If the joke triangle consists of 2000 Year Old Man/Brooks/audience, the relation is already triangulated by a split within Brooks descended from the blackfaced/white virgule in minstrelsy. Why add the interlocutor, if the comedy scene is already sexually mediated? (Brooks as comedian creates homosexual or iffy characters to reassure the audience whose love—his Catskills theme concluded “And though I’m not much on looks / Please love Mel Brooks”<sup>23</sup>—he passionately solicits.) Or why is the interlocutor necessary if the scene is already racially mediated? (Brooks shares with the audience a laugh over the old man’s nondenominational Yiddishism.) What, in short, can we intuit in Brooks and Reiner’s act of the special cultural function and technique of the comedy *team*?

To approach the answer, we need to track the progress of American popular entertainment from minstrelsy to its next triumphant form, vaudeville. (Brooks’s comedy is as compulsively recapitulative as *The Jazz Singer*, which, Michael Rogin observes, absorbs minstrelsy and vaudeville and silent movies into their cultural conqueror, the first talkie.<sup>24</sup> Brooks satirizes minstrelsy in *Blazing Saddles*, revisits the silent movie in *Silent Movie*, and imitates vaudeville largely in the form of his pairing with Reiner, himself.) Vaudeville was a kind of Taylorization and bourgeoisification of variety, formulated by its founder, B. F. Keith, with Boston rectitude in mind. Among proscribed phrases on the Keith circuit were “son of a gun” and “holly gee”; words that referred to the body in a slangy way—for example, “slob”—were forbidden. The point was certainly to allow the audience to forget that its eyes were trained on human bodies. Nor was the comedian allowed to notice individuals in the audience: Fred Allen remembered that the “Notice to Performers” hung backstage at Keith theaters enjoined comedians not to “address anyone in the audience in any manner.”<sup>25</sup>

Of course, some comedians were solo acts and were denied by Keith prohibitions merely the comic benefits of singling out members of the audience for colloquy or vituperation. But onetime blackface performer George Burns, out of blackface, interviewed Gracie for decades, and George Jessel, blackface rinsed, talked to his imaginary mother on the phone. In their own skin, some Jewish comedians looked askance at bourgeois audiences. The

turn was from the indirection of blackface to the indirection of dialogue, in which a sexless heterosexuality (with infantile wife or imaginary mother) defused the ethnic charge heretofore discharged by homosexuality.<sup>26</sup>

Reiner's job, we may infer, is to be vaguely heterosexual and white-*ish*—in the manner of vaudeville, to stand between, and in the manner of minstrelsy, to speak between, to interlocute—the 2000 Year Old Jewish Man and his audience of gentiles and suburbanizing Jews. Is Reiner Jewish? Yes, but it is not transparent; in some ways he himself is between Jew and gentile. (On the evidence of *Enter Laughing*, his autobiographical novel, Reiner is an almost perfectly secular Jew—he begins and ends the book trying to transform his accent into Ronald Colman's.)<sup>27</sup> He is one degree whiter than the interlocutor who, even in black face, was white-*ish* (a white trying to seem like a black trying to seem like a white). “Although he sometimes wore blackface, the interlocutor dressed with more decorum than the other actors and represented the white presence on stage. . . . He commonly spoke with a deep, resonant voice and often used standard English.”<sup>28</sup> What is the connection of standard English and a deep, resonant voice? The audience is reassured insofar as heterosexuality and whiteness can be identified in a single speech act. Whereas Brooks quarantines all possible contagions, Reiner stands next to them, enjoying them on behalf of the audience without infection: suburbanite in commuting relationship to the dangerous (sexual, aggressive, ethnic) city he moved out of. Commuting is the structural equivalent of joke work.

I seem to have assumed the diagnostic, clairvoyant, anhedoniactal voice of much cultural criticism—but I admit to finding something extremely appealing in the uncertain position of Carl Reiner (is he gentile?) vis-à-vis Mel Brooks (is he homosexual?). If Reiner mediates Brooks and audience, it is only by representing expansive whiteness and presumptive straightness in proximity, even if not in contagious contact, with Yiddish-inflected English and something not exactly straight. Reiner, while working with Brooks, worked *for* Sid Caesar, who brought elements of *Yiddishkeit* back into popular performance in the fifties when most of Jewish culture was moving the other way;<sup>29</sup> Reiner's attraction to the Jewish voice he tried to abandon for Ronald Colman's—like Twain's to the black voice—permitted Brooks all the sexual latitude his comedy required. To be loved for one's voice is not exactly to be loved for one's body—at least deniability is preserved—though on records what else is there besides voice?

Comedy teams cannot enact either homosexual or homophobic homosociality—they neither out nor closet—but the indecisiveness is powerful. The final oddity of odd couples is that the man who gets the laughs is so



desirable that his partner, his straight partner, must perform his attraction to him, and Tambo (black or Jewish or not) can convert his cultural weakness into vocal mastery. The odd incongruity was the regnant comic form from the fifties to the sixties, when suburbanization—heretofore largely a prerogative of Protestant couples but now available to New Rochelle's own Carl Reiner, creator of the commuting humor of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*—provoked by way of reaction to a travesty of the Protestant couple too odd to identify and exclude. This is what is worth regretting in the passing of comedy teams.

### iii.

Mel Brooks begins “2000 Years” with such a strong insistence on his progenerativity—

I've been married several hundred times. . . .

I have over 42,000 children—and not one comes to visit me [big laugh] in an afternoon. . . . Children, good luck to them, let them go. . . .

But they could send a note and write, hiya Pop, how ya doin' Pop?

—that one may think of Whitman and his six apocryphal children, not to mention his litters of literary disciples. I am not foisting an anxiety on this harmless fruitfulness joke. Brooks can be acute about the use of heterosexual credentials—“I've got a wife!”—which may echo as late as 1960 from Weber's broadly ethnic, vaudevillian self-exoneration to Fields: “Dat vas no lady, dat vas my wife!” That Brooks's homosociality can look odd (which I use now as a technical term) is frequently on his mind, which explains the fact that the “2000 Years” dialogues are frequently about the discovery of an unsuspected heterosexuality. The one woman the bimillennial man remembers dating was Joan of Arc, and in an excised part of the routine Brooks recounts the moment he discovered that the soldier was a woman.<sup>30</sup> Brooks also remembers the discovery of heterosex in general:

Brooks: [lamenting prehistoric ignorance]: We didn't know who was a lady. [big laugh] They was with us, but we didn't know who they were. [big laugh] We didn't know who was the ladies and who was fellas.

Reiner: You thought they were just different types of fellas.

Brooks: Yeah, just stronger or smaller or softer. The softer ones I think were the ladies all the time. [laugh] But a cute, fat guy—you could've mistaken him for a lady. [big laugh]

Reiner (later): How did [the discovery of females] come to pass?

Brooks: One morning [Bernie] got up smiling. [laugh] He said, "I think there's ladies here." [laugh] . . . He went into such a story, it's hundreds of years later, I still blush.

The incipience of heterosexuality is gleefully if secondhandedly and somewhat prudishly recollected, but the peculiarity is that to recall the first moment of heterosexuality is to imply a memory (not inferred by Reiner) of an indistinct time before it. "The softer ones I think were the ladies all the time" keeps ambiguous whether heterosexuality was always implicit in the homosociality that was at first, nevertheless, untriangulated.<sup>31</sup>

There is, not in "2000 Years with Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks" but more than a decade later in "2000 and Thirteen," an example of what seems to be gay bashing; on the near side of Stonewall, this would seem to be purely regressive. But for the purpose of bringing out what is odd rather than odious in Brooks's homosociality, even under the pressures of 1973 that would make odiousness a tempting disguise, I would like to revert to a previous moment in the history of homophobic comedy that reads similarly.

Alone in Burguete are Jake Barnes, the wounded protagonist of *The Sun Also Rises*, and his pal Bill Gorton, pretending to be Huck and Jim, fishing. One is heterosexual but castrated. What is the other? Brett (Lady Ashley) had, in Paris, been wrinkling the corners of her eyes at Gorton, and Bill was appreciative. Yet Bill, unlike Jake, unlike Brett's own Mike, unlike the Jew Cohn, unlike the bullfighter Romero, unlike, that is, every other man and his opposite, stays unmetamorphosed by Brett's Circean witchery. I do not need to know anything about Bill's private life, or anything about the sexuality of Donald Ogden Stewart, on whom he is modeled, to conclude that what Bill Gorton signifies for Jake is homosociality, per se, undefiled, with the triangulated third term being boxers or bullfighters or bulls, but not Brett, the cynosure of most of the triangulation of the novel, who destroys rather than facilitates the homosociality of the crowd. The best answer to "what is the other?" is humorist—Gorton resembles the real-life Stewart, author of several books of humor as well as the screenplay of *The Philadelphia Story*. (In which his namesake, Jimmy Stewart, cannot make his brilliant comic performance quite charismatic enough to subdue Katherine Hepburn—he passes her in an excess of brotherly love to Cary Grant—a failure the movie is helpless to explain.) One undervalued feature of Jake Barnes's character is his expertness as straight man, his strange dedication to qualifying not as a master but as an aficionado of bull slinging.

Which is why Gorton gratefully says to him in the midst of a comic riff,

“You’re a hell of a good guy, and I’m fonder of you than anybody on earth. I couldn’t tell you that in New York. It’d mean I was a faggot. That was what the Civil War was about. Abraham Lincoln was a faggot. He was in love with General Grant. So was Jefferson Davis.”<sup>32</sup>

This is ugly enough, but what is its humor? I cannot see the charge of the humor, or its discharge. Outing Lincoln and Grant and Davis does not unambiguously relieve Bill and Jake of the implication of their own angling but not triangulating homosociality, since Bill has just called attention to it. There *is* something humorous in “It’d mean I was a faggot” as opposed to “They’d say I was a faggot”—what we have here is the humor of mock unrepression as a superior form of repression. Still, I am unsure of what the contagiousness of the accusation means, or rather how it works: how did Gorton, for one thing, leap to the Civil War? The lack of a logical or paralogical step aborts the joke.

There is an unpleasant—humor-draining—sense here of a joke that can go left or straight at various forks: that might be about repression or unrepression; that might be employed to punish one’s betters (like the middle-class charge of inversion against aristocrats) or to gloat in one’s connection to them; that might, in Sedgwick’s terms, minoritize homosexuality or universalize it; that might relieve tension or exacerbate it on behalf of some future detumescence. The joke seems out of touch with its rationale: is omitting blacks from Civil War history a symptom of the exclusion of Jews and women from Burguete, at the price (the Jew and the woman had just managed an affair) of including homosexuality? Jokes may do complicated work, but this is more a riddle in reverse, a joke that might be a straight line.

It may be almost worth complaining that the historical question I raised—what brought up the Civil War?—would be a chronic problem of Donald Ogden Stewart criticism if there were such a thing, since he wrote two books of historical raillery—*Aunt Polly’s Story of Mankind* and *A Parody Outline of History*—both extremely weak in justifying their historical donées.<sup>33</sup> In a chapter of *A Parody Outline* called “How Love Came to General Grant,” Grant is described (in the manner of Harold Bell Wright) as “a man’s man—a man among men.”<sup>34</sup> There is no particular effort to pass this off as double entendre, but the parody of Wright allows Stewart to assimilate Grant’s virility to Billy Budd’s—Grant is a blushing, clean-living virgin—which perhaps accounts for Bill Gorton’s attribution of Civil War murderousness to a rivalry over him. What Hemingway may have captured in Gorton is the difficulty, in his original, of determining whether it is heterosexual or homosexual homosociality that amused him. Stewart (if I may

conflate him with Gorton) seems to resent his undying fathers either because they were too manly or not manly enough to produce adequately virile sons. The chapter of *A Parody Outline* after the one on Grant treats Custer's inadequately virile son (he leaves his wife to take up painting in Paris)—though Custer might seem to be an ambiguous image of the warrior patriarch.

In "2000 and Thirteen," Reiner asks Brooks for recollections of the great American generals.

Reiner: General Custer.

Brooks: A fag. [big laugh] The man was a fag. [laugh]

Reiner: The general's a fag?

Brooks: All generals. [laugh]

Reiner: Now just a minute. Are you trying to prove a psychiatric point?

Reiner: George Washington.

Brooks: A fag—the biggest. [laugh]

Reiner: General Eisenhower.

Brooks: A fag. [smaller laugh]

Reiner: General Cornwallis.

Brooks: A fag. [diminishing laugh]

Reiner: General Patton.

Brooks: A big fag. [renewed laugh]

Reiner: Can you explain that, sir? . . . We haven't any history of them being homosexuals.

Brooks: Hey, wait a minute. Hold on. Hold on, pal. I didn't say homosexuals.

Reiner: You said fags. You said the generals are fags.

Brooks: Yeah, Federal Army Generals. [modest laugh] . . . I shortened things, that's all.

Reiner (suddenly doubtful): Do you know any homosexuals?

Brooks: Maybe Custer. [laugh] Could have been. He had a lot of hair and he liked nice horses. [big laugh] Who knows?

This is close to a duplication of the Gorton routine, but I am not sure it is precisely the same joke on historical fathers. The joke, like Gorton's, does not work; but it is a more sympathetically confused failure.

The first anomaly to notice is that the sequence does not build—it deflates. The response to each apparent outing is weaker than the last, though the reference to Patton as "a big fag" revives the laughter somewhat; the

punch line, which in this case Brooks may have preconceived, is a dud. One wonders, in retrospect, why Brooks commits himself to the bit in the first place. At the punch line, when Brooks denies that he has been outing all along, the audience can only regret its previous mirth, such as it was. The final pun is not merely unhilarious per se; it also nullifies the laugh in anything before it. If the audience is chastened, it is not amused. What could be Brooks's comic intention of depressing his self-condemned audience?

The best approach to this mystery begins with the possibility that the itinerary of Brooks's joke may not be from offensiveness (fag) to offensiveness ostensibly withdrawn, along with the humor (F.A.G.), to offensiveness belatedly revived for Custer (fag?). Is it possible—grant the logical possibility for a millisecond—that at the end of a rather queasy development is a secret celebration? Or that, more plausibly, there are (humor-defusing) cross-purposes?

Focus on Sedgwick's dismay (as regards the epithet mongering of Boyd McDonald and others) that "it has at various times and for various reasons seemed to gay people that there was some liberatory potential in articulating the supposed homosexual secrets of men in power."<sup>35</sup> I quote Sedgwick to establish at a minimum that Brooks's joke is not necessarily on behalf of heterosexuality. Would it be heterosexuality that is served by the outing of its purest symbols? Yes and no: the answer is ambiguous because the point shifts. The audience's good humor is revived by the allegation that Patton is a "big fag," which means that it is gratified to think that behind hypermasculinity is homosexual panic (so that pacifists are actually more secure, as they like to reiterate, in their masculinity). But the routine is double jeopardized by the reaccusation that *Custer* is homosexual. I would say the audience's laughter at this last outing episode is genial—it is a sunny outing—which is supported by the fact that there is no source of humor otherwise. Custer is gay. What else is new? If this is convincing, then the audience has been seduced from the humor of exposure to the humor of assimilation, from the comedy of counteraggression to the comedy of secret sharing, from war, in effect, to camp.

Though Gorton's joke threatens to universalize homosexuality, it does not embrace it; its knowingness could not conclude in a cheerfully open-minded "Who knows?" But my interest is not so much to apportion moral blame as to put into relief Brooks's position with respect to his bit—and to explain, by this example, the efflorescence of male-male stand-up teams in the fifties to sixties and their withering by, say, 1973 at the latest, after the last full reunion of Brooks and Reiner (1973) until 1997, and after the

Smothers Brothers (1967–1969) and Rowan and Martin (1967–1973) had performed their definitive cultural work on tv. Prime evidence is the instability of Brooks's sexual stance. He is, safe to say, neither as defensively heterosexual as Gorton in Hemingway nor as offensively homosexual as Boyd McDonald in Sedgwick. I think he is careless about his position; not carefree, of course, in the midst of anxieties of every kind (there is a reason, I hope it is apparent by now, for the impossibility of fixing the exact nuance). "Insouciant" seems too studied; "contumacious" conveys an inapt awareness of subordinate status. Rebellion in America is filial, but Brooks as the 2000 Year Old Man is a coeval of the various fathers whom he outs.

In "The 2000 Year Old Man," I mean, you cannot, as in the case of Gorton, blame fathers (too macho or too sissified) for the ebbing heterosexuality of their children, because Brooks is his own ancestry; like Bruce, he contrives to be father and son at a stroke. The syndrome of *The Jazz Singer*, as complicated as it gets, is comparatively simple. Rogin shows that Al Jolson gets his taboo desires (Jewish mother and "American" girl) by the same act: murder of the Jewish patriarch. The way to American male heterosexuality is through generational conflict, which may imply assimilation and intermarriage. There are crossed wires along the way: the assumption of whiteness is predicated on the liberation of blackness; to be a jazz singer is to be a cantor in one's own way. Still, what remains simple is that the father must die. If, on the one hand, homosexuality may result if one's father is a killer (in the Custer story), and heterosexuality is earned by killing him (in the cantor story), what, on the other hand, is entailed by deathless self-fathering? Assuming the Yiddish voice may cut off the Americanized future, but it promises an oddly futureless immortality—this doubles the oxymoron of the rotten nectarine—of its own. There is in Brooks's comedy an unrelentingly omnivalent ambition: to be the American kid and his Jewish ancestry at once, father of thousands and outer of fathers.

During the course of the record in which the 2000 Year Old Man debuts, Brooks inhabits several other characters, often of uncertain and sometimes of fairly certain sexuality. He portrays Fabiola, the rock musician, whose last line to Reiner is, "It was a pleasure speaking to you—you're pretty." Later, as one of the seven original astronauts, Brooks explains to Reiner why his picture had not been on the cover of *Life* magazine. He and the other six are too ugly; the picture on *Life* is of seven models. ("They take pictures of them, so we're not ashamed for Russia to show such ugly little astronauts.") When Reiner concurs that the bogus model-astronauts are "handsome," Brooks goes further: "They're seven beautiful men. As a matter of fact, one of them is *very* beautiful." Clearly, something has hap-

pened between 1960 and 1973, so that nothing like these moments can recur, so that what does recur is an allusion to the 2000 Year Old Man's 42,000 children, reinvoked to prove that the Brooks character is a "virile human being." And the "F.A.G." joke, with its subtle grossnesses, replaces the masked self-outing that had regularly amused Brooks and his audience.

Back in 1960, you could occasionally observe, on stage, two men performing comedy. They seem to be competing for the love of their triangulated audience, yet if their intentions have ever been competitive (or if they are still competitive and repressed), nevertheless the rivalry has drawn them into an entanglement. Is it possible that the third point of the triangle can, in effect, drop out? The audience, in comedy settings, is often secretly or, on bad nights, vocally resentful of its inferior position, brutalized (the comedian wants "to kill them") and feminized (little wonder that in colloquial language, "hilarity" is confused with "hysteria"). This seems like patriarchy in miniature, yet the Brooks-Reiner audiences seem particularly genial, gratified to be on the inside of humor whose secret is hieratic, like the secret of nectarines or irrationals. In their adulation of Brooks they resemble Reiner, who laughs cheerfully throughout the albums, witnessing many of Brooks's surreal flights for the first time himself. (He is a straight man who does not remain, in the manner say of George Burns with his paralogical wife, straight.) The Brooks-Reiner audience produces only weakly a third point of the triangle: it seems merely to double and reinforce what Reiner and Brooks already do for each other.

Reiner, at times, may seem to be heckling Brooks, interrupting him, hazing him, as if the agent of an audience that wants Brooks to fail, but he is not a heckler but a secret spouse, not representing the audience in its resentment so much as in its love. He may figure, on stage, suburban fifties heterosexuality, but he is a helpmate; he only wants to abet; he wants to reflect Brooks's sudden glory. The heterosexual position (as in Hemingway, except that it is voluntary) is castrated: Reiner must curtail his own considerable talent to amuse. Brooks is irrepressible; he insists on his own desires; he is willful. The "odd" position (or the position whose paradoxicalness projects the oddity of the relationship) is dominant, as in "The Odd Couple" itself. Reiner and Brooks are engaged in a dyadic intimacy that is reciprocal, charged, self-sufficient, and full, but as a comedy team they feel the need, from time to time, to triangulate—to objectify the hysteria of—their mutual attraction.

Why are there no more comedy teams? Because now, in the two decades since "2000 and Thirteen," comedy teams would have to *declare*, as Brooks feigns declaring in his "F.A.G." bit, or else we would declare for them. Com-

edy teams in 1960 could not declare, and tacitly prevented, by the nature of their anomalous combination, our prurient declaring on their behalf. The range of specifications of current declarative taxonomy could not include subjunctive *oddness*: the juxtaposing of two stereotypes, heterosexual and homosexual, that might (Wayne Koestenbaum-fashion) posit a third term and heterosexualize, or might (Terry Castle-fashion) collapse into twoness and lesbianize. A pretentious actor played by Brooks in another of the routines on their first album declares proudly, "I happen to be a lesbian." Reiner corrects him, "You mean Thespian."

A male-male comedy team is an odd couple, and an odd couple is a union that cannot declare its essence to be this or that: half a prissy peach, half a virile plum, not either, not both, not a composite, not a compromise, something other, something better than either even in decay. This irrationality veiled in the simplest of ratios, 1:1, denies the surveyability of homosocial-homosexual boundaries that, castellated, protect our patriarchy; it defies the sort of knowingness, as Sedgwick puts it, that terrorizes homosexuals and heterosexuals alike. It razes, so to speak, the question of what sort of couple counts as homosexual, insofar as it razes the newly impolite question of who counts as a Jew. (We are all Jews here, says Brooks. We are all whites here, says Reiner. Are *these* predicates exclusive?) The cultural benefit is that there are as many dangers in despising this sort of pollution, as Mary Douglas might phrase it, as in celebrating it. What version of heterosexuality would dare to include the intimate coupling of Reiner and Brooks? Which would dare to exclude it? The laughter of this abjection—this failed exclusion—is a lost charm. In theories of the homosocial continuum, it is the missing link.

In San Francisco, in the late 1970s, I swear I heard the following conversation on a talk radio station, KGO. The caller should have been Mel Brooks, much of whose work, I believe, is a meditation on the epithet in question, playing a homophobe.

Caller: I don't know why they call themselves "gay." What's gay about them?

Host (warily): So what do *you* call them?

Caller: I call them fruits.<sup>36</sup>





## i.

An Indian at the table of an Englishman in Surat, when he saw a bottle of ale opened and all the beer turned into froth and overflowing, testified his great astonishment with many exclamations. When the Englishman asked him, "What is there in this to astonish you so much?" he answered, "I am not at all astonished that it should flow out, but I do wonder how you ever got it in."<sup>1</sup>

This is the sound of Immanuel Kant telling a joke; and if the joke is not good, it is far and away the most amusing thing in the "Analytic of the Aesthetical Judgment." Is it sublime or is it beautiful? It is neither. It is pleasant: its primary appeal is to the body rather than the mind. Or so we are

informed by a “Remark” dangling at the end of the “Analytic,” a bathetic afterthought.

I find this disappointing. The joke seems to me to represent a sort of anti-sublime—which is to say that it has a sublimity of its own—since the Indian feels, in his astonishment, what he should have felt before a “lofty waterfall” (*KJ*, 125), say, rather than cascading beer. That the joke is about a perversion of sublimity does not mean, of course, that it is itself a perversion of sublimity, let alone sublime. But the joke’s punch line is anticlimactic—the anecdote is a joke for just that reason—which means that we double the Indian’s astonishment before an unworthy object. If there is a sublime of *bathos*, as Thomas Weiskel put it, opposite that of *hypsos*,<sup>2</sup> then the joke (bathetic, about bathos, bathetically placed) is a perfect specimen. Kant is resolute in not seeing this, but he persistently illustrates it. In a precritical demarcation, he writes that “nothing sinks deeper beneath the sublime than the ridiculous.”<sup>3</sup> This formulation distinctly, if unintentionally, lends the ridiculous a sublime, even oceanic, depth.

Longinus, on the other hand, does see that the ridiculous has its own sublimity: “Ridicule is an amplification of the paltriness of things.”<sup>4</sup> But he does not seem to mean much by this—he mentions it in passing. Nor does he show the least anxiety about the converse, more troubling to his project of aesthetic discrimination: that the sublime might also amplify the paltriness of things, and so would have its own ridiculousness. Not that the sublime is ridiculous, but that it might become ridiculous in belated imaginations—the sophistication of which comes off just as silly as Kant’s Indian’s naïveté—is at least the *intended* lesson of the example of Timaeus. Timaeus manages, Longinus insists, only a faux sublimity when he writes that Alexander “gained possession of the whole of Asia in fewer years than it took Isocrates to write his *Panegyric* urging war against the Persians” (*LS*, 51). Longinus proves that this encomium is just puerile by extending its logic:

How plain it is, Timaeus, that the Lacedaemonians, thus judged, were far inferior to Isocrates in prowess, for they spent thirty years in the conquest of Messene, whereas he composed his *Panegyric* in ten.

Longinus makes a joke of the measuring of incommensurables. I wonder, however, whether his mockery betrays his own missing of the joke. The faithful stretching of Timaeus’s logic (not quite to snapping) would be: “How inferior is Isocrates in prowess, for it took him a decade to compose the *Panegyric* urging war, when it took the Lacedaemonians only three to

win one.” That Alexander took less time conquering than Isocrates took composing is more striking than that the Lacedaemonians took somewhat more, but the tendency of the comparison would be the same. What Longinus depreciates in his analysis of Timaeus is not the sublimity but the wit, which indicates sublime respect (for Alexander) by amplifying the paltriness of someone else (Isocrates). The inference is not that measuring incommensurables is a sign of a lapse from the sublime to the ridiculous, but that it is essential to the sublime, which must always *include* the ridiculous: sublimity here is the literary (Isocrates) in ridiculous proximity to power (Alexander).

Longinus manages to make the implicit Timaeian point—that sublimity is inhabited by the ridiculous—as unwittingly as Kant demonstrates that the ridiculous is sublime. Here is one of Longinus’s great examples of the authentically sublime, from Homer:

And far as a man with his eyes through the sea-line  
haze may discern,  
On a cliff as he sitteth and gazeth away o’er the wine-  
dark deep,  
So far at a bound do the loud-neighing steeds of the  
Deathless leap. (*LS*, 61)

Fair enough: we recognize sublimity when we hear it. But Longinus, pushing that recognition to analysis, makes a fatal if inevitable miscue: “The sublimity is so overpowering as naturally to prompt the exclamation that if the divine steeds were to leap thus twice in succession they would pass beyond the confines of the world” (*LS*, 63). I am not quite sure, reading that appreciation, how to tell it is not ridicule. Of course, in a way I know how. Passing beyond the confines of the world is exactly what the sublime is engaged to do. If we take Longinus as he would have us, the sublime equation is  $2x = \infty$ . Nevertheless, there is something debasing in performing the math—any formulation is a formula—and we recall that bringing out the ridiculousness of Timaeus was accomplished by a similar mathematical analysis.

Homer, to be sure, does not involve *himself* in the nonsublimity of the ratio, as Timaeus does. The solution to Longinus’s predicament would seem to be never to explicate the sublimity of the sublime; the flaw is that Longinus had to ridicule the ridiculous by contrast. The sublime must be, essentially, beyond measure. In Kant’s terms (with respect to the mathematical sublime), it cannot have “an adequate standard . . . outside itself. . . . It is magnitude which is like itself alone.” But Kant adds, almost immedi-

ately, that the sublime is “that in comparison with which everything else is small” (*KJ*, 109), which means that incommensurability is universally measurable, that Timaeus made no mistake, that the sublime like the ridiculous is an amplification of the paltriness of things, of all things minus one. In the comparison of the sublime and the ridiculous, therefore, the ridiculous both suffers and subverts.

Would a similar but opposite analysis bring out the sublimity of the Indian’s ridiculous mistake? It is not merely that the depth of his ignorance clarifies the heights of our wisdom, on the Hobbesian theory of “sudden glory.” We do feel our superiority to the Indian, but our amusement by him masks another feeling, giddier but deeper. I said before that the joke astonishes us as the Indian is astonished; I would go further now and argue that we are astonished by the same thing that astonishes him. Since a joke involves tension and release, it may be emblemized by the bottle of ale—the anecdote is as much metajoke as Homer’s steeds leaping into heaven are metasublime. But a joke is more than tension and release: when people tell us jokes, our mystification lasts beyond the punch line. We feel sublime helplessness not merely for the duration of the joke’s suspense, but also before a timeless power. Authentically mystifying is how the joke teller gets his fizz into the bottle. To analyze a joke—this is what a metajoke invites us to do—is to see the released froth as something prepared and stored, waiting to please us by belittling us.

On analysis, sublimity is ridiculous; on analysis, jokes are sublime. We cannot feel elevation without feeling put down, we cannot feel put down without experiencing the depths, in endless vibration. This would seem to be the experience of the sublime per se, as Kant and exegetes define it. Sublimity involves a mental “vibration . . . a quickly alternating attraction toward, and repulsion from, the same Object” (*KJ*, 120). My only quarrel with Kant and exegetes is that they do not see the humor of this oscillation, as between parental power and childish helplessness. The progression of sublime theorists Weiskel, Hertz, and Knapp represents an ever more vigilant attempt to keep the sublime unselfprotective, which may mean, as Knapp puts it, keeping sublimity from degenerating into a “satirical caricature of self-congratulation” (as it risks doing, according to Knapp, in Burke).<sup>5</sup> Granted that advertising one’s own sublimity (“How’s this for sublime!”)—proclaiming one’s identity with the sublime object via identity with the reason that is equal to it—is ludicrous. But there may be something ludicrous in its antithesis: “I am rent and routed by sublimity!”

Knapp does not represent the sublimist as declaiming in that way. For Knapp, the Kantian subject is prevented from falling into a “satirical carica-

ture of self-congratulation” by his oscillation “between sympathy and irony in relation to the self’s identification with truth.”<sup>6</sup> The prevention of satire by irony is homeopathy already on the border of the comic. Lyotard’s agonized sublimist, however, rises to a height of melodrama that could use irony: “He [the law, i.e., reason] desperately needs an imagination that is violated, exceeded, exhausted. She will die in giving birth to the sublime.”<sup>7</sup> Instead of a healthy, appreciative imagination acknowledging its master, here is a raped imagination in fatal confinement; Knapp’s self-division takes the form of self-irony, but Lyotard’s takes the form of self-rape and semi-suicide. This may seem ludicrous to us, but more to the point is that it is unclear why it did not seem so to Kant. Levity is also, in Kant, a form of violent self-division.

It is remarkable that . . . the jest must [always] contain something that is capable of deceiving for a moment. Hence, when the illusion is dissipated, the mind turns back to try it once again, and thus through a rapidly alternating tension and relaxation it is jerked back and put in a state of oscillation. (*KJ*, 225)

The mind is not fooled only once, externally. The mind divides internally, being fooled and fooling itself, unable to match itself, as in the case of the sublime, over and over.

How would this lead to laughter? The mental oscillation sets up a physical one, “an alternating tension and relaxation of the elastic portions of our intestines, which communicates itself to the diaphragm (like that which ticklish people feel)” (*KJ*, 225–26). The Indian joke is approximately a meta-joke insofar as it is about tension and release, more exactly because it does not subside comfortably in entropy, but begins to return against time. (How do you get the bubbles rebottled?) What I do not understand, since Kant grants that “with all our thoughts is harmonically combined a movement in the organs of the body” (*KJ*, 225), is why just the joking oscillation sets the intestines throbbing. Why doesn’t the sublime tickle?

## ii.

In 1960, around the time Mike Nichols and Elaine May arrived at Broadway and immortality, it was obvious to many observers, in the presence of the self-mortifying Phyllis Diller, among others, that comedienues (as they were called) had to be more or less repulsive. This turns out to be untrue, along with other clichés of the period (midwesterners were not, as

it happens, too bland to be funny, nor blacks too angry, nor homosexuals too upsetting). The best mainstream female comedian of our era, Ellen DeGeneres, managed when she was still doing stand-up to neutralize the issue of attractiveness by a kind of girl-next-door transvestism. But even at the time, the stereotype had an odd corollary that should have seemed bewildering: Hollywood comic actresses, as opposed to comediennes, played off of their good looks or even, in one variation on the theme, their glamour.

What was the difference? I suppose that if you could have taken a reading of the minds of male audience members (who have traditionally determined success in comedy more powerfully than women), you would have found that the position of the female stand-up is a challenge in the first place; add sexual allure to her wit and the result would have been not the tension and release of humor, but pure exacerbation. This much of the answer probably could have reached self-consciousness, and I do not dismiss it. A comic screen actress has only mediated relations with the audience, so that however beautiful and funny she may be, someone else, Spencer Tracy or Cary Grant, say, has to deal with it. But I doubt that that could be the whole explanation, given that what the explanation explains happens not to be the case. We are considering what made audiences think Phyllis Diller had to be a hag, and what made Diller think it herself, rather than the eternal necessity of it, and the discrimination opens up the possibility that whatever everybody thought was only a sublimation of the syndrome.

One peculiarity about Diller was that, though she put herself down in typical ways, she could be threatening in just those ways. She was, in one extended bit, a dangerously typical female driver—the doubling of the bind is that the stereotype condemns modern women as too masculine and not masculine enough. Also, I can remember not following the comic drift of her relationship with her mythical husband, Fang. The confusion I felt (aged 10–13, say) was that Fang seemed a good name for *her*. In retrospect, what seems obvious is the phallic nature of her grotesque looks (Phallus Diller, she might have named herself for, as it were, the stage): sharp nose, sharp chin, ophidian hair, and infinite cigarette-holder.

What preoccupies me about stand-up—why I want to analyze it in terms of its theatrical setting, beyond the formal or psychoanalytic examination of jokes per se—is that it involves, essentially, standing up, or at least elevation. In previous chapters I have been thinking only about the paradoxes of male stand-up, which has been traditionally pretty close to a redundancy. The best guide to female stand-up may turn out to be Neil Hertz,

especially in his essay, "Medusa's Head: Male Hysteria under Political Pressure."<sup>8</sup> Political pressure in his essay means 1789 and 1848, and afterwards, and among the male hysterics are Burke, Hugo, and Tocqueville; they keep personifying their anxiety about political revolution and epistemological disarray in terms of a female figure who, in the emblematic rendering by Hugo, is standing up—self-destructively, exhibitionistically, defiantly—on the barricades. Phyllis Diller is a descendant of these hallucinatory Medusas, doing stand-up, creating if not hysteria then, at her best, hilarity, which may be male hysteria in spasms.

Hertz's title comes from Freud's essay (or notes) of 1922, "Medusa's Head," one peculiarity of which is that it divides in half, with two different evaluations of Medusa that seem not to be in touch. First, Freud hypothesizes that men see in Medusa's hair the mother's hair surrounding her genitals, and as usual are filled with the horror of castration; but the snakes "serve actually as a mitigation of the horror, for they replace the penis."<sup>9</sup> Then Freud writes, confusingly, that "this is a confirmation of the technical rule according to which a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration." Could "signifies" be right? Only in the sense, I suppose, that relief from the threat of castration signifies castration. (Then where is the relief?) In this sense, fetishism is its own opposite: the snakes resemble the penis (unlike a fetish), and they remind men of the maternal absence (instead of blocking the memory of it); still, the result seems to be a simultaneous avowal and disavowal of castration exactly *like* fetishism.

Perhaps this reversible fetishism accounts for the apparent turn in Freud's argument, when he submits that the display of Medusa's head is used to terrify enemies. "If Medusa's head takes the place of a representation of the female genitals," Freud writes, "or rather if it isolates their horrifying effects from their pleasure-giving ones, it may be recalled that displaying the genitals is familiar in other connections as an apotropaic act." This seems wrong: the Medusa's head, I had thought, represented both the female and male genitals, both the evidence of castration and the multiplication of what had been detached, so that isolating horrible and pleasurable effects would be impossible. Evidently, however, you can aim the Medusa's head so that the horror flows outward toward one's foes but the reassurance flows inward toward oneself. Could the wind shift and the gaze drift back?

Hertz has been criticized by Knapp for finding in Kant's sublime too much comfortable self-protection and not enough self-laceration.<sup>10</sup> Insofar as he is concerned with Freud's Medusa essay, Hertz might have been par-

doned for expressing either the comfort or the agony, since Freud's two impulses seem barely to be in contact, as if he might look up at Phyllis Diller and say, "She is hideous like a phallus so she is finally no threat" and, "She is hideous like a female so she is."

In "The Laugh of the Medusa," an essay that does not have much to do with laughter or Medusa, Hélène Cixous does at least register her scorn for Medusa in her reassuring role. "Too bad for them [men] if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one. But isn't this fear convenient for them?"<sup>11</sup> As against this emasculating but remasculating Medusa, Cixous proposes one who is "beautiful and . . . laughing." Phyllis Diller is laughing, half of what is required, but she is laughing at least in part at herself, at her ugliness, and men laugh at ugly women in relief that they are not threateningly different.<sup>12</sup> Suppose, on the other hand, that the female comedian, up on stage as if on the barricades, were not grotesque. Suppose, therefore, that one could not chart the direction of laughter: are we laughing at her or is she laughing at us, when we seem to be laughing together?

The vacillation is between pleasure and displeasure, as in the sublime; what Cixous opens up beyond this is a version of sublimity that takes the form of beauty as disguise. Perhaps the result is not merely a vibration of pain and pleasure but an inability to be certain of the difference, pain that feels like pleasure, antagonism that feels like harmony. Masochism would seem to be a plausible cognate, but so would tickling, to return to Kant's psychosomatics of laughter: the laughing Medusa makes her victims laugh. And we cannot decide about Mike Nichols, on stage with Elaine May, whether he is in sympathy with her humor or the victim of it. Is he the mediating figure of film comedies or merely a surrogate member of the audience, always almost overwhelmed?

### iii.

I have no memory of seeing Nichols and May perform (the team disbanded when I was ten), but it is as if they were always in my mind. Now, when I think of Elaine May, I only picture photographs on album covers, some of which either have become iconic or seem so to me. In one, Richard Avedon poses her as Nefertiti.<sup>13</sup> In another Avedon portrait, May grins openmouthed at the camera, hair wilder than usual, at the digital melting point between Elizabeth Taylor and Lucille Ball.<sup>14</sup> In one picture she makes her eyes droopy and asymmetrical, perhaps for a Jewish mother avatar (*E*,



inside cover). On another album, she looks rather like Imogene Coca.<sup>15</sup> So let us say her looks are among Liz's, Lucy's, Coca's, a Jewish mother's, and Nefertiti's. Another picture would add another identity.

Meanwhile, what is perpetually fascinating in Mike Nichols's expression is absence of same. He is so blank, he might be the nerdiest or slyest or stupidest boy in the class.

All of this makes the "Telephone" routine emblematic (*E* and *B*). Nichols plays a steadily infantilizing man in a public phone booth who has only one dime to make an important phone call; while he is asking Information for the number, the dime is collected. First, he tells the operator what has transpired—her advice is to hang up, whereupon the dime will be refunded. Nichols, his voice breaking into Shelley Berman's, replies, "No, no, it won't, operator. Listen to me! I know that sound! I've heard it all my life. I know it's in there!" The operator, who calls herself by her title, is unmoved. "Information cannot argue with a closed mind."

Nichols demands to speak to her superior: "Is there anyone else I can speak to? A human?" Information coolly responds, "You wish to talk to a human?" and connects him to the supervisor, who is the origin, in voice at least, of Lily Tomlin's "Ma Bell" character, Ernestine. The information supervisor, however, is offended at Nichols's suggestion that his dime is gone. "Bell Telephone gets millions of dimes. They wouldn't pick out your dime to steal."

When Nichols asks for the next supervisor up the line, it is Miss Jones, who sounds like Marilyn Monroe. In contact with her feminine sympathy, Nichols collapses into sobs. She whispers, with interest both maternal and seductive, "You've lost your dime." Nichols only hears the maternal, and wails, "No, she took it!"

She? Well, yes, she. Because the pay phone itself, the phone company, and all its employees have become female incarnations for Nichols. "Information" is the machine personified (which is why Nichols wants to transcend her to "someone human"); "Information Supervisor" is the company itself, indignantly taking Nichols's suggestion that his dime is gone as a libel not on the technology but on the corporation (so Information Supervisor becomes Tomlin's Ma Bell). Finally, the phone company humanizes and a female voice escapes the machine. But there is something suspicious: the voice is too female; and the economic equivalent of it is the free phone call Nichols is granted. If this female voice is all it claims to be, mother and mistress in a single presence, no losses and all gains, there is such a thing as a free lunch, civilization without neurosis, perpetual motion, immortality. Nichols dials the number that he has finally learned on no dime,

rather on the promise of pure costlessness, but (punch line) the number is wrong.

The names for the May characters are “Information,” “Information Supervisor,” and “Miss Jones”; the name for the Nichols character is only, in my mind, Nichols. May is a perverse trinity, three people none of whom is a person, while Nichols plays a part so flayed as almost not to involve a persona. (It may be worth trying to ignore that the emblematic Nichols character is Nichols in a bit about a lost dime. Still—it certainly is Nichols who is generally at risk of being swallowed in Nichols-May routines.) May, in effect, takes on all of the dynamic sublimity of the absent, looming, soul-quivering corporation and its mathematically sublime infinitude of machines before assuming the beauty of “Miss Jones,” but Miss Jones is just another manifestation of the unimaginable, and she puts Nichols out of his pain in the sense of consummating it. May is the laughing Medusa, if that implies that her implicit beauty (*vox et praetera nihil*) seems to do less for the masculinity of men in her range than a witch’s frightfulness.

#### iv.

In “Disc Jockey,” Mike Nichols plays a name-dropping radio personality called Jack Ego, interviewing a brainless starlet called Barbara Musk (*E*). From a formal point of view, the interest of the routine is that laughs come equally from Nichols and May: as opposed to the usual construction of comedy teams, for example Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner or Dan Rowan and Dick Martin, in which one comedian is designated straight man and the other gets the laughs, Nichols and May cannot be assigned invariant positions. In “Telephone,” laughs come from both Nichols and May, but Nichols is more scored against than scoring. In “Disc Jockey,” there is a breathtakingly adept switching from straight to unstraight throughout.

The structure of the bit is provided, rather rotely, by increments in the enormity of Nichols’s name-dropping, which starts with Bernard Baruch, climbs through the pope, and peaks at God. Meanwhile, May stays in a single character—as opposed to “Telephone”—but the central joke of her half of the dialogue is that she is a completely stupid actress publicizing a movie called “Two Gals in Paris,” in which she plays the lead, Gertrude Stein. May stays in character only because her character does not stay in character. In “Disc Jockey,” May begins with “femininity”—where she ends in “Telephone”—but she is playing a draggy female playing a lesbian.

Nichols is wonderful in the routine, getting laughs often enough merely from the abrupt, nasal, subtly modulated way he terminates quanta of star-

let idiocy with “Uh huh. Uh huh. How about that?” At which point he resumes name-dropping, for example, Albert Schweitzer: “I haven’t seen him for a week. I think he’s in Africa.” Barbara Musk gamely replies: “So Al is in Africa. Well, gee, I didn’t know that. . . . What is there to say about Al [pause] Schweitzer?” She stops before Schweitzer, not quite sure how to pronounce it, then pronounces the “w” as “v”; her insecurity comes out in the inflection: “Schveitz'-uh?” This is the biggest laugh in the routine, and the audience applauds. I think, however, that there is confusion mixed up in the laughter—perhaps why it turns to applause. Most obviously, the joke says: Barbara Musk is so stupid, she has never heard of Albert Schweitzer. It also says: Barbara Musk is a Hollywood starlet, but under pressure she is just a dumb girl from Brooklyn with a name change, pronouncing Schweitzer’s name almost correctly only by guessing that he must be a Jew. (Her given name was conceivably Barbara Muscovitz, sometimes pronounced Muscovitz.) Here things get complicated: Elaine May is a Jew, as was Gertrude Stein, though not a dumb one.

Once again, we arrive at identity confusion. If May, in “Telephone,” achieves femininity only when it comes out of a machine, in “Disc Jockey,” she starts with screen-replicable femininity, but it reveals something: that the borders between Broadway star and Hollywood starlet and dumb girl from the declassed boroughs are always open. This sounds vulnerable, except that May has made the discovery (useful to Ellen DeGeneres and Paula Poundstone, q.v.) that when you are in the neighborhood of the abject, threatened by the return of sloughed skin, the best place to be is nowhere, the strongest technique to master is that of disappearing in view.

For me, the endlessly interesting moment of the bit occurs when Nichols drops the name of Bernard Baruch: “He’s not like a lot of your financiers. By that I mean he’s not only out for money.” May replies: “I think that Bernie is a real great guy—you know?—and I mean a real great financier [rhymes with dancer].” Then Musk giggles, the short nervous giggle she deploys in the face of Nichols’s barking throughout. This time the audience gets confused, and thinks that May, not Musk, is laughing, in delight over her apt mispronunciation. When audiences are on their side, they love it when comedians appreciate themselves. (It is the performative and sometimes male-male equivalent of the masculine requirement that beautiful women consider themselves, even if they modestly hide it, beautiful, to ensure that they are not witches, coldly emitting rays.) The result is that the audience’s laughter swells along with May’s giggle; I cannot tell if it ever realizes its mistake.

May's humor is often this sort of apparition. At the moment when she seems to humanize and appear (in this case, simply laughing with the audience), she is most efficient and evasive, the paradox of Miss Jones. Her laughter, totally knowing and controlled, like the laughing Medusa's, creates our laughter, deceived and extravagant. We grant that we are inferior to her, and though we are enjoying the experience, we are hardly (if we are men) remasculated by it. This is some other kind of pleasure.

v.

On one record, we are allowed to eavesdrop on Nichols and May working out a routine; they have decided that Nichols will play a son informing his mother of his professional ambition: to become a male nurse.<sup>16</sup> Something in this (it is probably obvious enough) wildly amuses Nichols, and he begins to laugh out of control. May is also amused, mainly by what is happening to Nichols. She begins to taunt him, not as the son in the skit, who would not be laughing, but as the son who is: "You're a happy boy, always smiling, always glad." Hearing her allude not to his character's determination but to his own current helplessness, and further convulsed by the representation of his hysteria as "happiness," Nichols' abjectness spirals. He gasps, "Stop it, for God's sake." May will not stop.

We arrive, evidently, at the logic of tickling, which Mary Douglas describes in her analysis of joking as a "mock attack": "The baby laughs more when it is tickled by its own mother than by a stranger."<sup>17</sup> It is worth observing that in "Transference," a typically knowing skit, Nichols admits to his psychiatrist, "You remind me of, well, this is crazy, you remind me of my mother," and by the end of the skit he is sobbing (*B*); she sees that he is distraught, and recommends chicken soup. In "Mother and Son," Elaine May telephones her boy, a NASA scientist, and begins: "Hello, Arthur, this is your mother. Do you remember me?" (*E*). Every attack is a mock attack, and vice versa. If I granted the Freudian premise that the unconscious is a joker, I would add that Nichols was born in Nazi Berlin, and that May's real family name is Berlin: the relation of Nichols and May is so glibly and gaily incestuous that it forestalls analysis, that we read incest as tickling.<sup>18</sup>

Adam Phillips has written a short essay on tickling in which he quotes a girl of eight: "When we play monsters, and mummy catches me, she never kills me, she only tickles me." It may matter, however, that the young child, or perhaps Mike Nichols in the studio, would be apt to cry out, "Stop! You're killing me!" Perhaps we might wish to consider what May does to

Nichols as a perversion of tickling, since she is not a mother playing monsters but an actress playing an authentically monstrous (Jewish) mother, whose tickling is not relief from the threat of killing but a form of assassination. I shall quote Phillips now at some length to lend further support to the hypothesis that May is tickling only by perverse metaphor.

Through tickling, the child will be initiated in a distinctive way into the helplessness and disarray of a certain primitive kind of pleasure, dependent on the adult to hold and not to exploit the experience. And this means to stop at the blurred point, so acutely felt in tickling, at which pleasure becomes pain, and the child experiences an intensely anguished confusion; because the tickling narrative, unlike the sexual narrative, has no climax.<sup>19</sup>

Since May goes beyond that blurred point, we may infer that she is not so much mother as dominatrix. The problem is that I do not know how you stop at a blurred point or, rather, what a blurred point is. I hold with Euclid that if there is a blur, there is no point. You might conclude, accordingly, that the adult ought to stop before the blur, before the anguished confusion—when is that?

Phillips's ultimate assertion that tickling has no climax might seem to counter his penultimate one that there is a moment beyond which it cannot go pleasurably on. He is right, of course, both that there is a pleasure in being tickled and that it bleeds into pain. What I do not believe is that the nature of a nonclimactic narrative permits the clarity of a knowable stopping point. This is what Phillips takes into account by calling the point "blurred": it is not the point that is blurred, however, it is the whole event. "Anguished confusion" characterizes *all* of tickling (the confusion is that the anguish is mixed with pleasure). The pleasure may not always be pain but it is always becoming pain. Even the victim of tickling may not be sure when enough is enough.

Nichols and May give the impression of conducting an analysis of humor within their humor, and they are almost explicit about the centrality of tickling to their conception of it. In a skit called "Mysterioso," two spies (apparently) meet on a train. Nichols has a ticket (it turns out merely to be a laundry ticket in the weird bathos of the skit) hidden down his shirt, "over [his] clavicle." May reaches for it; tickled, he bursts out laughing (*IM*). In "Physical," more tellingly, Nichols is a patient counternamed Mr. Prober, who goes to his new female physician, counternamed Dr. Mittelschmerz, to discuss a pain low in his abdomen (*B*). He wants to describe it, she wants to look. Finally, she begins to do the probing.

May: Does this hurt? Does this hurt?

Nichols: Doc, please! No wait. Doctor, please, can you wait? [Nichols laughs hysterically, explaining:] I'm very ticklish.

[And later:]

May: This is just your stomach.

Nichols: The abdomen is very . . . [hysterical giggling]

After a while, the mood turns flirtatious: Dr. Mittelschmerz finds out that Mr. Prober is a lawyer and unmarried. From the tickling we ascend or descend to actual equality and the prospect of climactic sensuality.

That is the meta-punch line, only a mildly dissatisfying one. Generally, Nichols and May work without gags; when they feel the need to end their skits, they mainly do a perfunctory job of it. The end of the "Telephone" skit—Nichols, at long last, makes his call, but it is a wrong number—gets only a letdown laugh. The climax of "Disc Jockey"—Nichols name-drops God—provokes a big laugh, but is too mechanical and adolescent to deserve one. When Nichols and May improvise to piano music, they often simply leave it to their accompanist to cap the skit. All of which is to say that they are conducting serious explorations of the sensuous and aesthetic pleasures available in nonclimactic forms.

Noelle Oxenhandler, also writing about the sensuous pleasures legitimately available between adults and children, like Adam Phillips stresses that the nature of these pleasures will always be, so to speak, ante-anti-climactic.<sup>20</sup> In giving us comedy that never arrives at a punch, Nichols and May restore us to that moment when pleasures were indefinite (even jokes could be repeated indefinitely). The cost is that we cannot be assured that the pleasure and pain will meet at maximum pitch and, like particles and antiparticles, execute a mutual annihilation.

When Elaine May, as mother to budding male nurse, brings Mike Nichols to paroxysms of pain and pleasure, to groans of laughter, we can imagine Nichols craving more and no more. He splits in half: kill me, save me. He does not merely, in the way of typical enthusiasts of sublime self-division, invite the threat of death to be saved; he cries out to be saved, in part, to provoke more in the way of destruction.

## vi.

The audience, meanwhile, hears all this, deeply amused of course, as if Mike Nichols, in the manner of a leading man, were in the business of keeping Elaine May's power reassuring rather than apotropaic. Somehow,

however, I imagine the audience as victim, too. The reason must partly be that Nichols and May often imagine a triangulation of their relationship, and the third party may be ignored to the point of death. For example:

Nichols: Clamp.

May: You have the clamp.

Nichols: Suture.

May: You have the suture.

Nichols: Edith?

May: Yes?

Nichols: I love you.

May: Please, please.

Nichols: You turned your back at the coffee machine.

May: I did not turn my back.

Nichols: You deliberately turned your back.

May: Excuse me, the oxygen is failing.

Nichols: Well, turn it up.

May: I'm trying to.

May: Now, would you like anything else, otherwise I'd like to go.

Nichols: Go in the middle of an operation?

May: Well, I have nothing else to give you, you've got it all in the patient.

May: Now the oxygen is failing again.

Nichols: Let it fail.

Who is that patient? You might say he resembles Nichols, insofar as his life is at risk. But he is dying perhaps to free Nichols to assume his less convincing role of predator. Might the patient not be, in effect, the wounded husband? Nichols and May did many adultery sketches—in all of them, of course, spouses are voiceless, though, oddly, in some of them, they are not quite negligible, like the unconscious patient. In “Second Piano Concerto,” both partners in the adultery (an English dentist and his protégée) agree that they miss the betrayed husband: “I wanted us so very much to be happy, all three of us” (*B, IM*).

That English adultery could be so civilized as to admit the possibility of a contented ménage à trois amuses Nichols and May, as does a kinkier French notion in a skit called “Adultery” (*E*). May, appalled that her husband was not, by a mistake, made party to the party, worries that “he will be so hurt, he will think we don't want him.” “Adultery” consists of three

national takes on the theme: Americans, it turns out, are the only ones who conceive of adultery, even if histrionically, in terms of betrayal and sin. "I'm sick, I'm physically sick with guilt," Nichols says. May emotes, "Oh God, what kind of a person must I be?" Nichols tops her in his regard for the victim of their tryst: "He's a saint. He's a saint. He's a saint. He happens to be the only saint I know."

Insofar as adultery, like jokes, triangulates a third figure who is absent and victimized, it will always be available to comedy. Nevertheless, I do not find the structural similarity so compelling as to recognize in it a complete explanation for the persistence of victimized thirds in Nichols-May routines. A couple of observations add to the sense of veiled significance here. On the personal level, everyone has wondered at the fact that Nichols and May did not marry each other. However their relationship was defined, it was extramarital. The professional corollary was that their humor could, at its most sophisticated, be so audience-oblivious (no jokes, no big finishes) that they often did without audiences altogether, and recorded in the studio, as if by assignment. These facts add up to the following hypothesis: that Nichols and May's relationship was so close as not to triangulate visibly, even though as a comedy team it was almost obliged to, but that it was an illicit relationship, such that the absent third party—audience insulted as unconscious patient or unknowing husband—was not ignored, it was betrayed. If Nichols was always in danger, in May's presence, of being swallowed, the audience's danger was abandonment.

Because American-style adultery is a concern of Nichols and May's, and because, as of 1960, sin and guilt still lingered as a part of the American conception of it, *The Scarlet Letter* must of necessity become the text of the sermon. What intrigues me (in this connection) about *The Scarlet Letter* is that, for all its gloominess, Hawthorne has trouble keeping everyone (himself, too, at odd moments) straight-faced.

The scene was not without a mixture of awe, such as must always invest the spectacle of guilt and shame in a fellow-creature, before society shall have grown corrupt enough to smile, instead of shuddering, at it. The witnesses of Hester Prynne's disgrace had not yet passed beyond their simplicity. They were stern enough to look upon her death, had that been the sentence, without a murmur at its severity, but had none of the heartlessness of another social state, which would find only a theme for jest in an exhibition like the present.<sup>21</sup>

A social state such as Hawthorne's or ours, for example. Oddly enough, the scaffold is always almost hilarious. Dimmesdale, we are assured, is the



least humorous man in the world: "Had he once found power to smile, and wear a face of gayety, there would have been no such man!" (*SL*, 121). Nevertheless, when he ascends the scaffold and sees the Reverend Mr. Wilson walking home at midnight, "the glimmer of this luminary suggested the above conceits to Mr. Dimmesdale [that Wilson's lantern is a halo lit by heaven, newly opened for Governor Winthrop], who smiled,—nay, almost laughed at them,—and wondered if he were going mad" (122). His mind had sought relief, apparently, "by a kind of lurid playfulness." He catches himself; but he does not cease to be funny, and when he thinks of himself standing where Hester Prynne had stood, he "burst[s] into a great peal of laughter," which is echoed by Pearl's. Suddenly, he has an audience. Throughout the scene, Pearl keeps laughing. The Comedian as the Letter A.

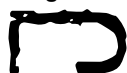
Up climbs Hester Prynne, and now they are on stage together. Who will be the audience? Joining Pearl in that function is none other than Roger Chillingworth, victim of the adultery, but more abandoned father than abandoned husband. That is: the relationship of Hester and Dimmesdale had been a sexual but somehow nonclimactic intercourse between mother and son; the joy had been utterly painful for Dimmesdale. Pearl represents those future generations that will find hilarity in such scenes, Chillingworth the generation of patriarchs that had not. United, they demonstrate the inseparability of the ridiculous and sublime as witnessed by the triangulated.

Thomas Weiskel's version of the sublime begins with the danger of the son before his castrating father, moves on to the danger of the son before his all-consuming mother.<sup>22</sup> Hawthorne would modify this—not obliged to be Freudian, he notices that in America it is fathers who worry perpetually about castration at the hands of their sons. This is Chillingworth's risk, but being swallowed is Dimmesdale's, as well as Mike Nichols's and his dime's, which means that when the minister has his delayed pre-oedipal consummation, achieving with Hester what Miss Jones only promises, it is only to be consumed. Hester is sublimity in female form, as opposed to female formlessness, which is to say that she is a beautiful Medusa. Up on the scaffold, she is a figure of femininity such as those on the barricades described by Neil Hertz, self-destructive, exhibitionistic, and defiant. Thanks to Sacvan Bercovitch, among others, we can see her precisely as a Medusa of 1848.<sup>23</sup> Hawthorne's hysteria is under the same political pressure.

"The scene was not without a mixture of awe"—Hester could inform us how it feels to be the sublime object. And the sublime subject: around her, in her first performance as adulterer, she sees the world as a landscape of "rigid countenances." Presumably, the men are finding reassurance as best

they can in the rigidity that, Freud explains in "Medusa's Head," is both emasculated and remasculating. What if the male hysteria converted itself into hilarity? It would not be better protection for the men. It is Hester Prynne who "longed . . . to behold all those rigid countenances contorted into scornful merriment."

Hester wishes that instead of stiffening against the horror of their daughter's abandonment, like Chillingworth, her audience would vibrate, like Pearl. This is a fair précis of the essential dream of the comedian, for whom audiences sit in paternal judgment until they are successfully infantilized. "Had a roar of laughter burst from the multitude,—each man, each woman, each little shrill-voiced child, contributing their individual parts,—Hester Prynne might have repaid them all with a bitter and disdainful smile" (*SL*, 60). If they had turned her into an object of humor, the Puritans would have made a demonic blunder, since laughter is always reversible, a toxic cloud that can always drift back, a contagion in the presence of which no faculty, including reason, can feel its ultimate health. Their laughter would have allowed Hester to smile in return: only that lack of provocation keeps Hester from incarnating all of Cixous's prophecy *avant la lettre*. If they had laughed, the object of their ridicule would have reflected back to them their own paltriness, not their transcendent destiny. An analytic of the ridiculous would locate the sublime as one of its lesser, and most containable, aspects, a bathetic afterthought.



## i. David Letterman

### A. *Intelligence*

David Letterman is baffled and balked by intellection; he is heaped and tasked by it. Wherever it manifests itself, he is awestricken. Like most Americans, he is unsure where to locate it—Ted Koppel is his idea of an intellectual<sup>1</sup>—but wherever he finds it, he is unmoored to the point of hysteria. Disconcerted, but freed of his inhibitions by her unwittiness, he belowed at Marilyn vos Savant: “I’m as smart as you!”

David Letterman thinks as quickly as anybody in America—as fast as William F. Buckley Jr., in one field, or Stanley Fish, in another. The conundrum that he seems to confront every day is how it is possible to think dan-

gerously fast yet possess no ideas at all. His condition is the intellectual equivalent of priapism among mannequins. It seems to make him furious.

It makes him, also, a great comedian, since jokes are successful to the extent that they impose the form of thought on disarray. Therefore Letterman's jokes are, disproportionately, metajokes; they are about the formal intelligence with only dreck for substance.

### *B. Female Intelligence*

What David Letterman is least able to comprehend, of all forms of mind, is a particular type of female intelligence, as manifest in such personages as Jane Pauley or Teri Garr or Helen Hunt. He told an interviewer that "there is something very appealing about smart women, intelligent women. And you can see the problem there: if they're smart enough for me to be interested, then they're not going to have anything to do with me."<sup>2</sup>

Letterman is apt to refer to such women as "witty." By this, I think he intuitively follows. Pure comedy is Euclidean form imposed on debris. Insofar as the shape of humor is congruent with its material, on the other hand, it is wit. Of course, neither Pauley nor Garr nor Hunt is an aphorist along the lines of La Rochefoucauld or Wilde. What gives their wit its unexpected integrity is gender: their femaleness is both the substance and shape of their humor. Letterman cannot fathom this, but he adores it.

### *C. Speed*

In his purity, in what I wish to call his abject purity, Letterman can seem like a disembodied intelligence. Women on his show may fawn on him, but when they do, Letterman is often repelled—any Letterman theory would have to begin with the national seductiveness of his encircled, beleaguered, castellated comic mind. We hear that he watches his weight to the point of anorexia (on a show he said he was 6'2", 170 lbs.); a study of the jaws of afflicted Americans would force the conclusion that anorexia is the last wilderness of American Puritanism, where will nourishes itself on its own negation, where self-abasement is the only licit form of self-fashioning, where heroic bleeding is the only sanctioned form of heroism. On *Good Morning, America*,<sup>3</sup> after his Academy Awards show failure, Letterman said that you learn by "ingesting the negative," which is unintentionally a bulimarexic pun (the negative once ingested, Letterman's most negative emissions are in jest).

You can conceive of Letterman almost as pure velocity. An improvising comedian has a demented time sense: the world appears to be moving too slowly for his mind. (For a great comic actor, it may seem to be moving too

fast.) To the extent that time is psychological, a comedian is forced to live in concentric spheres, revolving at different rates. The scraping throws off sparks, but it makes Letterman crazy. The effort to put the two worlds in gear may involve alcohol or drugs; for Letterman, it entails speeding.

“To annihilate both space and time” was the hype of American Protestant technological millenarianism of the train and telegraph era. The dream of pure soul—or pure mind—is, at its most intense, to be everywhere at once. The mode of American apocalypse proceeded from train to telegraph (the increase in speed was a progressive animation) naturally to tv and cyberspace. TV apocalypse is the American style of abjection.

#### *D. Car-son*

The paradox is that Letterman can be the loudest American comedian since Sid Caesar. He yells a large fraction of his jokes, with a leonine roar like the start of an engine, as if his first Indiana jokes had to shout out the whole Indianapolis 500. He is also oddly physical: he does facial shtick (the old skunk eye, for example); he plays with his suit; he imposes his body even as far as the camera.

Yet all the time you feel that there is a mind at the center of all this physical demonstration, driving it like a machine, like a car, trying to assemble itself into existence as the car. The great Protestant comedians turn jokes into violent, swift, sleek, beautiful mechanisms. Johnny Carson was Letterman’s predecessor in this pursuit, securing a rock-age technical perfectionism from the jazzy improvisations of his Jewish coequals, Mort Sahl, Mel Brooks, Buddy Hackett, or Lenny Bruce.<sup>4</sup> Carson’s mind would plant itself within costumes; costumes would mortify Letterman; but Letterman’s suit and his body itself, and his face itself, are contraptions, like Disney’s automated presidents on steroids, like the hardware of the brilliantly improvisatory Big Blue.

Letterman’s height does matter. You feel slightly disoriented and depressed when his guest is taller than he is. But I read Letterman’s height, as I shall argue with respect to a peculiar moment in Céline, as pure verticality, a single ideal dimension.

#### *E. Lettermania*

Almost everyone is willing, in Letterman’s presence, to play at abjection: his audience grovels in order to be part of the show and sensibility. They submit to his thinking of them as his “kids.” Yet when you observe him in the company of those he respects—Pauley or Garr or Hunt (who, like mothers, are adored and unattainable by tacit consent) and Carson (among

fathers)—you fantasize a similar familiarity, by which I mean that he could be, with you, similarly abject. The Letterman anecdote that any essay on him has to repeat concerns the note he passed to Teri Garr before a commercial: “I hate myself.” With respect to Carson, the abjection is more balanced (you are not supposed to be the man your father was): “That’s the guy. Maybe I could work at it, but I’m not the guy.”<sup>5</sup>

The TV relationship, which the Academy Awards audience resisted, is not a collision of subjects and objects, as at the movies, but a collusion of abjects.<sup>6</sup> David Letterman makes our abjection visible—he puts it before the camera—but visible in a twice-disowned body, once by self-disjunction, twice by the technologies of fame; and a corollary is that exposure to the dreck of New York that Letterman loves to dwell on and in leaves us feeling almost absolved. The “abject,” as Kristeva calls it, is sloughed like snakeskin and nicely retailored.

## ii. Kristeva/Céline/Letterman

### A. Kristevan abjection

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.<sup>7</sup>

So begins Kristeva’s “Essay on Abjection,” and I believe it is, so to speak, empirically correct. However you take Kristeva’s neo-Freudian etiology (“abjection” is a reminiscence of the condition of the subject, unseparated from the maternal body, before it is a subject, the adult affect of which is horror of the indiscrete), it is certain that she knows how abjection is experienced. It is experienced, first of all, as a negative ecstasy—you are “literally” beside yourself. It may be summarized as your failure to know what is inside of what, to find your own synecdoche, the homunculus that stands for self. This entails a series of incongruities.

(1) “Abjection,” whose attitude ought to be servile, contains within itself, as one of its phases, a “revolt.” (2) The revolt is not against desire, it is by desire. This is understandable enough, except that desire’s willfulness and uprightness seem oddly (for desire) puritanical. (3) If desire acts like restraint, the object of abjection—the “abject,” as Kristeva calls it—must resemble, at any rate, the object of desire; one is summoned by it. Desire is pseudoconscience because abjection is pseudodesire. (4) Because desire acts like restraint, it can be a source of self-pride. But instead of “it [desire] holds on to a certainty of which it is proud,” we get, “a certainty of which it [desire] is proud holds on to it.” Desire feels, since it is desire, as if its power to resist comes from elsewhere; yet the feeling of self-disenfranchisement must be exactly what, in abjection, desire is resisting. If abjection is pseudodesire, desire plays the role of conscience abjectly.

This flux (or “vortex”) of will and victimage—such that what is tempting is not desired, and desire in turn restrains, and desire in turn is held—seems to me exactly apt as a diagnosis of Puritanism (only in the presence of the abject will desire convert itself into conscience, surviving by self-betrayal). Yet it is safe to say that Kristeva is not the theorist to appreciate the comic possibilities of deriving uprightness from prostration.

### *B. Abject Histrionics*

The person who is “beset by abjection” (*PH*, 1) puts on, I should think, daily infradramas, actor before audience and vice versa. You are, after all, literally beside yourself, watching your faculties—desire, for example—play unaccustomed roles, always authored by someone else. Kristeva, however, does not quite say this. Her abjected subject is caught in a vortex, is haunted; even its power to resist is merely susceptibility to sickness and repulsion; it is far more acted upon than active. Nowhere before her culminating section on Céline does Kristeva focus precisely enough on the histrionic aspect of abjection; and in the Céline passages, I think, she does not contemplate it so much as just accurately note it, the result being a *desideratum* for David Letterman studies.

*Abjection* has, in English, an uncollapsible performative dimension. All of what follows is listed in one dictionary as a single meaning of the term *abject*. “Sunk to a low condition; cast down in spirit or hope; degraded; servile; groveling; despicable; as abject posture, fortune, thoughts; base and abject flatterers.” The oddity is how this meaning silently turns at “servile”; and how the theatrical dimension of the second example (“abject flatterers”) is already ambiguously present in the first (“base and abject flatterers” will assume an “abject posture”); and how the apparent redun-

dancy of adjectives in the second example (“base and abject”) fudges the question of whether at the root of abject performance is abject being.

The term *abjection* itself is falsely, therefore appropriately, Latinate and upright. This would be telling if everyone who was abject were aware that he or she was “abject”—which may be the case, for all I know. There may be no abjection, which is a failure of definition, without a frustrated definitional literacy. At any rate, all those who identify themselves as abject, for example Céline, will feel the telltale self-dramatization of the word. Even if we posit a victim of abjection who is psychologically illiterate, nevertheless it may be a symptom of the ego at the edge of its defenses, scouting for even a counterproductive self-definition, that any extreme state will be enacted with hostility and lobbed like a grenade to the cheap seats.

### *C. Comic Abjection*

Not sufficiently registering the histrionic assertiveness of abjection is not sufficiently featuring, I want to argue, the essentially comic dimension of abjection.

### *D. Abjection and Laughter in Kristeva*

Laughter ought to have more to do with Kristeva’s nosography. There are moments when its exclusion seems almost perverse. Following her initial association of the abject with unthinkable permeabilities, Kristeva specifies vaguely that it is a “‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me” (*PH*, 2). If it crushes her, it cannot be taken lightly; yet the presence of significance without meaning seems comic in general, and like David Letterman’s comedy in particular. Its symptom is verbal speed: “The speech of the phobic adult is also characterized by extreme nimbleness. But that vertiginous skill is as if void of meaning, traveling at top speed over an untouched and untouchable abyss, of which, on occasion, only the affect shows up, giving not a sign but a signal” (41). Here the crushing weight of meaninglessness seems to take the form of Road Runner levity; surely in Kristeva’s oxymoron we are approaching laughter: “But with the borderline patient, sense does not emerge out of non-sense, metaphorical or witty though it might be” (50). Not quite there, however. “On the contrary, non-sense runs through signs and sense, and the resulting manipulation of words is not intellectual play but, without any laughter, a desperate attempt to hold on to the ultimate obstacles of a pure signifier that has been abandoned by the paternal metaphor” (50–51).

Occasionally one is sure that, for Kristeva, it is simply the case that



laughter palliates the abject condition. Discussing Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, Kristeva asserts that "Verkhovensky is abject because of his clammy, cunning appeal to ideals that no longer exist, from the moment when Prohibition (call it God) is lacking. Stavrogin is perhaps less so, for his immoralism admits of laughter and refusal" (*PH*, 19). This would appear to set up a disjunction: abjection or laughter. Yet when Kristeva goes on to describe the modern world, what she finds is abjection and laughter undivided: "The worlds of illusions, now dead and buried, have given way to our dreams and deliriums if not to politics or science—the religions of modern times. Lacking illusions, lacking shelter, today's universe is divided between boredom (increasingly anguished at the prospect of losing its resources, through depletion) or (when the spark of the symbolic is maintained and desire to speak explodes) abjection and piercing laughter" (133).

Which is it: or or and? Laughter would seem to be an ambiguity within a pollution. But there is a way to be more precise about the relationship. When Kristeva defines sin as "subjectified abjection" (128), you might feel inspired to refer to laughter as "objectified abjection." Kristeva finds abjection unfunny when signifiers have been "abandoned by the paternal metaphor," when "Prohibition (call it God) is lacking," but piercingly funny "when the spark of the symbolic is maintained," which may be the difference between an enervated and an electrified absence. Maintained objectivity is funny when it "sparks," perhaps, because a joke is dreck enflamed by form, that is, by a standard it inhabits but to which it cannot aspire. Thus it becomes clear why laughter, disjoined from abjection generally, attaches to it when Kristeva comes to describe modernity: in our century, apocalyptic yet Godless, abjection is a psychopathology that happens to be realistic. When you cannot abject your abjection, according to Kristeva, as filth or sin (the God of Jews and Christians alike being dead)—when objectivity lingers in the world only as a measure of abjectivity—you laugh.

This move allows Kristeva to value Céline without embracing him: an abject person may manifest a symptom, but in an abject world, a person may be a symptom.<sup>8</sup> But I still do not think that Kristeva—by positing that Céline's laughter makes him a symptom of an objectively abjectifying world—has gotten his humor exactly right. She arrives at the topic at long last in the brief culminating section on Céline.

With Céline we are elsewhere. As in apocalyptic or even prophetic utterances, he speaks out on horror. But while the former can be withstood because of a distance that allows for judging, lamenting, condemning, Céline—who speaks from within—has no threats to utter, no

morality to defend. In the name of what would he do it? So his laughter bursts out, facing abjection, and always originating at the same source, of which Freud had caught a glimpse: the gushing forth of the unconscious, the repressed, suppressed pleasure, be it sex or death. (*PH*, 205–6)

Céline is an apocalyptic writer (he maintains the spark of the symbolic) without revelations; his “language of abjection” merely “topples” into “nothing more than the effervescence of passion and language we call style” (206). The unconscious gushes so the laughter bursts so the language topples; Céline is a domino. The paradoxical willfulness of abjection drops out: some have degradedness thrust upon them. Yet even Kristeva’s Céline is capable of knowing that abjection may be histrionic. The two Henrouilles women in *Journey to the End of the Night*, which should have been the name of the David Letterman show, embody in Kristeva’s phrase “calculated abjection” (*PH*, 168). It does not gush, burst, or topple: it manipulates and maneuvers. Abjection may be a recrudescence of the premirror stage, but it practices before a portable mirror. (Kristeva implies at various points the relation of abjection to anorexia—food is feces in the abject ethos—but the gagging nausea she describes is not the anorexic’s willful self-sculpting.)

### E. Céline

What is funny about *Journey to the End of the Night*?<sup>9</sup> Partly its humor resides in local excesses; but the greater, antithetical joke is *Journey’s* refusal to ascend or decline: its perfect horizontality. You feel mounting hysteria (under particular circumstances, a condition confusable with hilarity) or spiraling despair (plus gallows giddiness) from the book’s failure to ascend or decline with you. In the first place, Bardamu seems to preserve just enough innocence—just enough vulnerability to goodness—to keep horror fresh, from World War I to Africa to New York to Detroit to the insane asylum back in France and his own old age. But even the uniformity of that movement—in which goodness is a blip—is not constant enough. Bardamu’s horror is always prepared; it precedes existence. Even before the Great War, a young Bardamu describes God as “sensual” and “grunt[ing] like a pig. A pig with golden wings, who falls and falls, always belly side up, ready for caresses, that’s him, our master” (*J*, 1983, 4). This God is a bourgeois even before Bardamu has the experience of impoverished resentment. Bardamu knows him by inverse empathy, because his own destiny is to fall and fall, belly-side up, ready for abjection.

“You can be a virgin in horror,” Céline or Bardamu notoriously pro-

claims, “the same as in sex” (J, 1983, 9). As a matter of fact, one is never, in *Journey to the End of the Night*, a virgin in horror, if that means unacquainted with it. I call attention to the possibility that one may be “innocent . . . of Horror” (Marks’s translation [J, 1934, 9] of “on est puceau de l’Horreur” [VBN, 21]), nonetheless: the point is that something in Céline takes the place of innocence, that is, the place before experience. Whatever that something is, it must have the following skewed characteristics. It must precede experience as thesis to antithesis (so that the experience of horror is recognizable); it must figure experience proleptically (so that Bardamu can recognize horror as the correlative of what horrified him even before he encountered it in World War I); it must continue during experience (so that horrors, anticipated and unending, will nevertheless stay fresh).

The trivial American name for that thing is “attitude,” as when Jerry Seinfeld says that David Letterman “has a great attitude.” The humor of attitude is that it judges all the time but is strictly nonjudgmental; it is not, as Kristeva says, apocalyptic or prophetic, insofar as there is no experience that precedes it to judge; and when experience does accrue, it is powerless to make a case, mocked by its own superfluity. The same attitude greets every eventuality. This is significance without meaning, intelligence without ideas: attitude is a way to be of the world but not in it. Starting with attitude means that there is nowhere for a journey to get. Bardamu arrives at horror immediately, and spends the rest of his journey—undertaken on the assumption that there is an end to the night—rediscovering it, until the peripatetic immobility abruptly shuts down.

Céline says brilliantly that “one has to be more than somewhat dead in order to be truly a wisecracker!” (quoted in *PH*, 138). Death is, technically, infinite repetition without intervals, which makes Bardamu’s travels an approximation of an afterdeath experience in continuous disgust. What is the humor of this? How would *The Divine Comedy* be comedic if there were only *Inferno*? Invoking the trite term *attitude* is only meant to call attention to a quality of *Journey*’s abjection: its chronic inexperience. The novel may be described as a monologue that occasionally intersects not experience or other humans but other monologues. When Bardamu, in the first chapter, describes God as a pig, he is performing at the time his poem on the subject, before the history that can only justify it.

And wherever Bardamu’s monologue crosses another, there abject histrionics cross. The monologue is the privileged technique of attitude: it comes first, but it confines reality such that nothing different in kind can come second. Everything that comes keeps coming first. And attitude is abjection on a roll, abjection exuberant in its basic exhibitionism. Tania, a woman

whose beloved has just died, is “intent on her tragedy, and still more intent on exhibiting it to me in full flood” (*J*, 1983, 315). In this respect, she resembles the newly blinded Robinson, who “groaned under his bandages as soon as he heard me climbing the stairs” (281). It is important to locate the performativity within abjection, not outside it and compromising it. Robinson is in fact abject—prostrate, “sunk to a low condition”—but he is also acting it. “People live from one play to the next,” Bardamu says, always ready with the aphorism that is his own emblematic performance (224). Thus a “tragedy” such as Tania’s feeds comedies such as Céline’s: a comedy here is the continuous, endless, climaxless performance of tragedies.

When Bardamu arrives at New York, he shares a laugh—unique experience, since most communal laughter in this book is of a piece with horror, merely smut amid smuttiness—with his fellow voyagers.

Talk of surprises! What we suddenly discovered through the fog was so amazing that at first we refused to believe it, but then, when we were face to face with it, galley slaves or not, we couldn’t help laughing, seeing it right there in front of us . . .

Just imagine, that city was standing absolutely erect. New York was a standing city. Of course we’d seen cities, fine ones too, and magnificent seaports. But in our part of the world cities lie along the seacoast or on rivers, they recline on the landscape, awaiting the traveler, while this American city had nothing languid about her, she stood there as stiff as a board, not seductive at all, terrifyingly stiff.

We laughed like fools. You can’t help laughing at a city built straight up and down like that. But we could only laugh from the neck up, because of the cold blowing in from the sea through a gray and pink mist, a brisk sharp wind that attacked our pants and the chinks in that wall, I mean the city streets, which engulfed the wind-borne clouds. (*J*, 1983, 159; Céline’s ellipsis)

This is a peculiar passage. Not only does Bardamu—uncharacteristically socialized—share a laugh, but the laugh goes on and on; it is a unique moment of *helpless* laughter. Nor is it immediately explicable. What is so funny about skyscrapers?

It is almost an obvious smutty joke. The city is erect in public; it is an urban exhibitionist. But the joke is trickier than that, because the European cities that “recline on the landscape, awaiting the traveler” justify the presumption that cities are women, making the grammar of the translation appropriate, even if its biology is not: “*she* stood there as stiff as a board, not seductive at all.” If the woman repossesses the phallus, which seems to

be equal to converting herself into a mannequin, will this be perceived as comical by men? Not entirely: the joke is only half-funny, only funny “from the neck up,” because the “sharp” wind “attacked our pants.” Castration is not funny when it can be felt; it is only funny insofar as the head can be separated, for the sake of intellectual amusement, from the body that suffers it. This separation, of course, is not merely a retreat to the intellectual; it is a retreat from castration to the intellectual by means of an act of self-castration. The joke here would seem to be that joking itself is the proud reenactment of castration in order to escape it.

The wind attacks both the voyagers’ pants and the chinks in the wall of the city: it is castration that one (offshore) sees erected in New York. Or not so much castration, perhaps, as abjection. In the place of the phallus is permeability rather than absence. The chinks of the skyline, Bardamu specifies, are its streets; what one sees erected vertically in New York is the evidence of its horizontality, which is the same as its unboundedness, its failure to demarcate in and out (wind attacking streets, streets absorbing clouds).

When Bardamu goes ashore, the street he walks down is Broadway—in three of the sensible four dimensions he walks by the Ed Sullivan Theater, where David Letterman performs. On Broadway, the truth of New York reveals itself to be horizontal and unbounded after all: “That street was like a dismal gash, endless, with us at the bottom of it, filling it from side to side, advancing from sorrow to sorrow, toward an end that is never in sight, the end of all the streets in the world” (*J*, 1983, 166). Broadway is abjection in the streets, abjection projected, abjection objectified (the world is abject and we are its blood), abjection as the avenue of American performance. Broadway literalizes Bardamu’s apothegm: advancing “from sorrow to sorrow” is equivalent to living “from one play to the next”; thus Broadway is the emblem of the interval-less automobility of Céline’s own performance. New York is always the land of the joke in Céline: below ground, where men excrete, they “laughed and joked and cheered one another on”; “the new arrivals were assailed with a thousand revolting jokes” (*J*, 1983, 169). But these are the smutty jokes that Bardamu despises. If you take New York City’s abjection (blood, urine, feces) and erect it as skyscrapers or enflame it as the lights of Broadway, you get the sort of joke that Bardamu himself laughs at like a fool from the perspective of his own object verticality: from the neck up.

One of the few uses of the term *abject* in *Journey* (in the Marks translation) is in the description of blinded, criminal Robinson, who “lay in . . . bed upstairs in an abject state of mind” (*J*, 1934, 322; “Lui, dans leur lit de

la chambre d'en haut menait pas large" [VBN, 290]). Yet this is only a page before we are told that Robinson "groaned under his bandages as soon as he heard me climbing the stairs." Abjectness is proneness seeking an audience. Whenever there is abjectness, there is performance; whenever abjectness is proudly performed, it is comic. It is comic because it should be prone but it is upright. "I was a hundred-percent sick," says Bardamu, "I felt as if I had no further use for my legs, they just hung over the edge of my bed like unimportant and rather ridiculous objects" (*J*, 1983, 148; "comme des choses négligeables et un peu comiques" [VBN, 158]). What is comic is that the essence of verticality uncovers itself as the sign of a complete horizontal impotence.

Napoleon said that a heroic speech would become comic if the orator sat down while orating.<sup>10</sup> Céline implies the inverse: the abject monologue becomes comic when it stands up. David Letterman, stranger in New York, caffeinated when he should be sleepy, vertical when he should be supine, panning New York from the Empire State Building down, is the stand-up comedian par excellence. The gestalt of New York City—the "standing city"—talk show stand-up realizes the implicit dimension: Letterman is vertical when we are prostrate, but we take his attitude as our own. All Americans are now funny, not just Jewish comedians and gag writers straining for weekly material. (The average gag on the worst situation comedies now is funnier, judged in isolation, than the best gag on, say, *The Honeymooners*; and the terrorized look on Groucho's contestants has faded from the face of the earth.) This eventuality—the comedification of America—is the most astounding fact about the American sensibility from 1960 to 2000. Where Bardamu meets America—in the New York-illuminated night, on Broadway, at the Ed Sullivan Theater—is the stage on which, at the millennial end of his century, its abjection erects its last cross.

### iii. The King of Comedy

What is the fate of abjection in Martin Scorsese's scarily intelligent film, *The King of Comedy*? It ought to be everywhere in the film, but seems to be nowhere. The pathetic comedian Rupert Pupkin (Robert DeNiro) should be abject but is utterly buoyant, directed, and simple in his psychosis. He knows where to seek the end of his night. Talk show superhost Jerry Langford (Jerry Lewis) should be symmetrically abject—if I have justified applying the term to David Letterman—but shows few signs of having any of the requisite boundaries whose permeability would horrify him. A first approximation of the psychocomic situation is that neither has abjection

because they have each other. Rupert Pupkin begins the movie in an exact copy of Jerry Langford's suit, and Jerry Langford ends the movie staring at multiple images, in multiple TVs, of Rupert Pupkin. When Rupert looks at Jerry, he sees his own body thrown off and replaced by an image, out of all time and space; when Jerry looks at Pupkin, he sees at a distance his own rejected body, rejected identity, rejected home.

One of the jokes of the movie is that to all appearances Jerry Langford is the real host of *The Tonight Show* and Rupert Pupkin the pretend host, yet the film gives Jerry Lewis the opportunity to pretend to be Johnny Carson. What does it mean to conclude that Jerry Lewis is to Johnny Carson as Rupert Pupkin is to Jerry Langford? It is almost precisely true to say that what Jerry Lewis gets to pretend to be is Protestant. When I first saw *The King of Comedy*, my initial reaction was: don't they understand that Jerry Lewis cannot under any circumstances be *The Tonight Show* host? Its star must be a pseudohick with attitude arriving in New York from the heartland; he hosts Jewishness there, and the chiasmus is the genius of the genre. He cannot be a Jew himself: one has only a distant memory of the ill-conceived *Joey Bishop Show*, whose only upshot was the subsequent glory of Joey's second banana, Regis Philbin.

My second reaction, however, is that the fate of Jerry Langford's Jewishness is the fate of his abjection. Not that Jewishness is the royal road to abjection, though it is a very fine road—rather that Jerry Langford's own body is treated like pork in his desire for pure imagery. Jerry is installed, in *The King of Comedy*, in layers and corridors of WASPitude (played by Shelley Hack); like the heart of the Pentagon, he is protected from infection not by impregnable walls or a moat but by an aseptic maze. At his network office, or at his penthouse, or at his country home, Langford's life is a Nordic iceberg.

But at the moment Pupkin penetrates Langford's country home, Jewishness reappears, his own body reappears, though it is unclear at first where. The Asian butler, Jonno, summons Langford home from his golf game, whimpering over the phone, "I'm getting a heart attack, already." For the time, only the Asian is a Jew. Yet when Jerry arrives on the scene, he manages to be, for perhaps the only moment of the film, expressively Jewish himself. Jerry kicks Rupert out of the house; making the pathetically tardy inference that Jerry (at a previous encounter) had only feigned kindness, Rupert says, belligerently, "So I made a mistake." "So did Hitler," Jerry counters. This riposte, I believe, could not have been in the script—it makes too little sense. It has all the marks of what passes in Jerry Lewis's

mind for a witticism: it is cruel, sharp, and fast, it has the form of a joke, but it has no humor. Does Jerry Lewis (or Jerry Langford) forget at the moment who is in power? What mistake of Hitler's is he thinking of? All that is clear is that something that has been abjected returns: what Jerry Langford expels, Jerry Lewis ingests. This is a moment of abject reorientation, only possible if abjection is the sort of rotatable axis I have described. Céline claims to be the true victim of World War II, and Heller and Roth (and the Jewish comedians of their generation) enlist themselves as Céline's truest disciples.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, Rupert (along with his accomplice, Masha, played by Sandra Bernhard) resolutely distances himself from all the New York nobodies and crazies with whom he manifestly has everything in common. As opposed to Jerry, who in this film is never anywhere in particular, Rupert is always somewhere. His comedy routine returns compulsively to his place of origin, Clifton, New Jersey; so does Rupert, who still lives in his mother's house, not fully separated from her in the way of Kristeva's abject subjects and almost all comedians.<sup>12</sup> But Rupert has an insight: in the world of the media, other people may carry your body for you, like your golf clubs.

What Rupert does to Jerry is give him a body and a place. In Rupert's aura, Jerry's body turns out to be bizarrely locatable and his defenses bizarrely pregnable. In Rupert, at long last, Jerry must ruminate on what he has abjected. Rupert and Masha capture Jerry, sit him down, mummify his body; for one night he is in one home, not every home. When Jerry is ensconced in tape, the film cuts to the network office where Rupert's blackmail offer (in return for Jerry's body, he will appear on *The Jerry Langford Show*) is being mulled: "Suppose we tape him," somebody says, meaning, "suppose we agree to videotape the show with Rupert before committing ourselves to broadcasting it." The pun is really an antipun: tape locates Jerry in one chair and one body but displaces Rupert from his image. When the tape is, in fact, aired, Rupert stands proudly beside his own face; Jerry is looking at many identical images in a department store window; then Rupert's face begins to multiply across hundreds of copies of *Life*, *Newsweek*, *Rolling Stone*, and *People*. Mechanical reproduction is squared idealism: it disembodies already dislocated souls.

In fame America, you can lose your body (in images), your voice (when Jerry Langford phones the office and says that he is being held hostage, it is assumed that an impressionist is staging a gag), and your name (the movie begins with a distribution of autographs, some of them pseudonyms). Here is the logic of abjection taken to its purest joke: at the end of the night, when



we are on the verge of sleep, when our bodies seem so massive that sleeping itself seems a burden, David Letterman conspires with Jerry Langford to stand up for velocity and lightness of being—all intelligence, no meaning. The dream is of a world that makes a joke of class, ethnicity, origins—of all situations. The American joke, 1960–2000, is that our abjection sees in the alienation of body, voice, and name the freedom to perform.



### i. Bathroom Humor

In *Live in Concert*, Richard Pryor appears on stage—the cliché has a meaning, because he is there before the audience can grasp it.<sup>1</sup> There has been an intermission after the Patti LaBelle warm-up, but no one intones, “Ladies and Gentlemen, Richard Pryor.” So Pryor assigns himself the function of getting everyone settled. The first words of the performance are, “Wait for the people to get from the bathroom.” Then: “Jesus Christ. Look at the white people rushing back.”

The subject of race has been broached. Who is at risk? First, the blacks: “You niggers takin’ a chance in Long Beach, Jack.” But no—a Richard Pryor concert is not white country, even at the Long Beach venue. “This is the

fun part for me when the white people coming back after the intermission and find that niggers stole their seats. [One of Pryor's white voices, nasal:] 'Weren't we sitting there, dear?' [Black gangster voice:] 'Well, you ain't sittin' here now, motherfucker.'"

Pryor has effectively divided the audience in half—it seems comically suicidal. Only Lenny Bruce had ever made his audience this self-conscious; but Bruce had assumed a pervasive Jewishness and maleness, so that even the audience at its most affronted was unified against him as a sort of mirror inversion. Pryor's case is a degree of complexity beyond that. The audience, apparently, will have to live as a division but laugh as a unity. And Pryor will not let the subject of racial difference go. Whites even swear badly. Another Pryor white character, head bobbing and eyes popping in a cartoon of sweaty uncool belligerence, can only manage: "Yeah, c'mon peckerhead. C'mon you fuckin' jerkoff." The lesson is that whites—including whites at a Pryor concert—cannot pretend to be black.

As a first offer in a negotiation, this is as complicated as any academic could wish. Granted that whites and blacks are attending the same concert—there may be some virtue in pausing over that simplicity. They seem to occupy the same position as subjects gazing at Richard Pryor as object. But this is not the movies, and the object is gazing back.

What he sees, first of all, is whites. Or rather: he sees—at least, imagines—whites seeing blacks. When the whites return to discover their seats occupied, they find themselves looking at proximate blacks instead of, as anticipated, a lone black man on a distant stage. This puts things in a new light. The effect of the clever little maneuver is to isolate whites against a novel unity of performer and audience. Pryor may be the comedian, but the whites provide the comedy. "This is the fun part for me," Pryor says, enjoying a rare interlude, or prelude, as spectator.

This would be involved enough even if we did not consider that the white audience—the real one imagining the imaginary one—must be enjoying the scene, too. Not merely at their own expense: this is necessarily a white audience for whom self-mockery is self-flattery. Nor is abasement, such as it is, an exclusively white amusement here. What the returning white couple finds is a cliché of black lawlessness and vulgarity. Blacks who have peaceably assembled at a concert in Long Beach have been caricatured by Pryor as outsiders who can only bully their way into the best seats at its Terrace Theatre, and they laugh at this. So do the whites.

Later in the performance, Pryor is working out the comic implications of white mechanicalness as against black coolness. Whites get snakebites

in the woods, Pryor submits, because of their style, meaning their fatal lack of style. Pryor mimes walking in the woods as a white man: goofy, head lolling in the clouds. When Pryor walks as a black man, he strolls to the rhythm of nature itself. He sees the snake, says “snake” nonchalantly, and executes a small sweet dance step aside. The trope is familiar: Sinbad does a white marching band/black marching band routine toward the same laugh. Since Bergson, there has been no mystery about the comic force of human mechanization, which is to say, in this context, of whiteness, but that leaves unexplained why black nonchalance gets an equal laugh. Is Pryor saying that even coolness is a machine, mass-produced and unconscious? Does this allow whites to escape their envy by considering black rhythm as sleeker machinery, not as a natural superiority of rhythm, reflex, and soul?

Yes and no. Both blacks and whites are presented with the spectacle and cliché of blackness; but the envy does not go away for the whites in the process, nor the glee of blacks. Step one of the humor is that blacks are also machines; step two is the unanimous transvaluation of that fact: the cyborgs are smooth. If blacks according to DuBois see themselves from both inside and outside in a white culture, there is a release of tension amounting to hilarity in affirming the split. Blacks see themselves as whites see them, but they like what the whites see. Whites now see themselves from the outside as well; but they are content, for the length of the occasion, to lend their mechanical bodies to the comic machinery. At no moment are whites and blacks in Pryor’s audience laughing for exactly the same reason. They laugh from different positions that go in and out of symmetry. But they all laugh.

You can be more impressed by the complexity, brilliantly marshaled by Pryor, or by the stunning final reduction. Whites and blacks laugh together and they laugh for the same duration. What could that mean?

I feel incompetent to answer, but I am interested, because comedy always produces a complicated inclusion in a way that neither American multiculturalists nor uniculturalists can theorize. The chiasmus of the talk show is less complicated than the Pryor relation. The only way I can begin to understand the nature of his inclusiveness is to begin, again, with his divisiveness. Whites are returning from the bathroom to find blacks occupying their seats. Do only whites need the bathroom? Is going to the bathroom the only thing whites do during intermissions? These questions are obtuse because the laughing audience—either at Long Beach or watching the film—has intuited the answer before the questions arise: having gone to the bath-

room only exacerbates the whites' abjectness upon returning to find—does it sound like a pun?—their seats occupied. Whites forfeit their class advantages when the abject calls; they have been separated in the process, but when they return, they have been equalized.

## ii. Death

A summary of the Pryor concert, which turns out to be concerted, begins this way: when his opening racial division of the audience has run its course, Pryor gets interested in animals. Mainly dogs, who mainly assume the attitudes and accents of black men. First there is the police Doberman who gives up running after a speedy black criminal, saying, "Sh-it. Motherfuck that nigger, man." Pryor has his own fierce Doberman, who shows his teeth when he is about to attack, but who supplies this warning: "This looks like I'm smilin', motherfucker? I'm about to get in your ass." He also once owned a male monkey, who stopped masturbating in humans' ears only when Pryor bought him a take-charge female monkey. When both monkeys die, a neighborhood German shepherd comforts Pryor: "What's the matter, Rich?" And takes his leave, saying, "You take care. . . . Now you know I'm gonna be chasin' you again, tomorrow?" Then Pryor considers horses, who "shit while they walk." But dogs, who "don't have no racism," go to play with a miniature horse, thinking it just a big dog, and a Great Dane brags, "I don't know what it is, but I'm gonna fuck it."

It is a remarkable development: if Pryor's first sequence on blacks and whites is a shrewd manipulation of subjectivities—bestowing and reversing and refocusing them—then this sequence grants subjectivity indiscriminately to almost everyone, almost everything. The whole world talks, especially animals, as if Pryor were inventing new folktales. And the series, which begins with canine ferocity but ends with interspecies democratic sex, seems emblematic. Oddly, the only animal that does not signify (and which has trouble with any form of intercourse) is the male monkey: he squeaks as he masturbates in everyone's ear until the new female monkey says, "Freeze," and gets him reoriented. That the male monkey is more nearly human than the other animals, and perhaps African, and adept (we would have thought) at signifying makes it alarming that he is uniquely inexpressive. A negative explanation is that the comic intention of the discourse is not to flatter our Darwinian pedigree. What remains to be analyzed is the inarticulateness of the monkey's phallic self-possession.

What follows is the tour de force of the performance, when Pryor acts out

his own heart attack. "Don't breathe," his heart commands, as Pryor mimes with his hands the tightening of a vise. His heart taunts him: "You're thinking about dying, now, ain't yh? . . . You didn't think about it when you was eating all that pork!" As the heart taunts him, Pryor continues to act out the squeezing of the vise, drops to his knees, writhes on the stage. There is nothing like it in all of stand-up, which almost by definition cannot permit falling down, though Mel Brooks as the 2000 Year Old Man takes some health precaution or other "that my heart should not attack me." This suggests that interpreting a heart attack as an attack not on but by the heart may be a necessity of the comic unconscious: it is a piece of self-abjection. It comes out of the animal motif insofar as Pryor lends expressiveness to yet another heretofore mute corner of the world; but that process can only reverse the general point of the recurrent black/white theme that black soul is uniquely one with black body.

Pryor now meanders on the subject of death; he loops it to another meta-theme by noting that whites mourn softly, blacks fiercely. The black woman grieves as follows: "Waaaaaaaah! Take me God! Take me take me take me!" Mourning is, apparently, orgasmic for black women, and this tacit observation brings Pryor to the second compensatory domain of black female orgasm: whipping kids. The young Pryor uses cocaine; his grandmother wails, "Take me take me take me," whips Pryor, and advises him, "Next time you do it I'm gonna tear your ass off again!" Thus begins the autobiographical moment of the concert, and the audience can pick up clues, though it is not easy. Apparently there is no mother on the scene; the father is initially presented as being as scary as the grandmother with respect to the general assault on Pryor's bottom. When Pryor fires the opening shot of his oedipal rebellion, "I'm not taking no more ass-whipping," the father punches him in the chest, which Pryor refers to as "my ass."

But when the subject of his father really takes over, so does a new mood. I'll return to Pryor's reminiscence of hunting with his father; suffice it now that for a long hushed moment, the father is loving and long-suffering, the woods are peaceful and holy, and Pryor is a happy, hapless child again.

The segue out—which seems to continue the theme but reverse the mood—is the observation that, in the woods, you need to be able to stare animals down; heavyweight Leon Spinks, Pryor observes, would be tough enough for nature. Then the mood rereverses: Pryor recalls his own boxing career, during which his body was constantly talking back to him. He wants to punch, but his arms say, "I ain't got nothing to do with it." He receives a blow, and his legs inform him, "Excuse me, I'm falling. I don't know about

you.” The pain itself signifies: “I’ll be fucking with you for the next hour or so.” What gains our attention is that Pryor’s virtuosity at turning the world loquacious is comic insofar as it is redirected against himself. Animals talk back, his own body talks back—but the signifying monkey, who like Pryor trains its fire on ears, only goes ny-ny-ny.

Pryor’s recollection of life in the ring threatens at times to turn into macho of the self-effacing variety, but finally the parody of toughness wins out and anticipates a yet more interesting self-effacement. Pryor has a little song that he sings every so often, arms akimbo like a sauntering sailor or an all-American hero, for example: “Macho man—I’ll take this knife and shove it up your ass.” By this point it is not shocking that masculinity is satirized as agency in events of anal penetration.

In black heterosexual lovemaking, it would seem to follow, the “woman don’t have orgasms.” No wonder they go in for whipping and mourning. “How was it, baby?” the black man asks the black woman. She gives him the *mèzz’e mezzo* wave with her hand—so-so at best. The black man hides his rage and shame at not satisfying her. “I ain’t got no time to be sensitive cuz I’m [Pryor returns to his ditty:] macho man—I don’t give a damn whether you come or not cuz I’m macho man.”

In an extraordinary final move, Pryor admits that he would like to ask, “Did you come?”—which he says in a wimp-nasal voice connoting “white.” Then he fantasizes letting the woman get on top, so that somehow or other it is she who has the orgasm. Final words of the concert: “She says how was it, I say \_\_\_\_.” The blank is silence, but Pryor’s meaning is signed by the *mèzz’e mezzo* hand wobble.

In a certain way, it is the only conclusion possible: after ninety minutes of omnivalent expression, what could close the polylogue besides Pryor’s own silence? And why not end the performance with a demonstration of the relief of not having to perform—of joining the judgmental audience? (The concert had begun with Pryor enjoying the opportunity of watching the whites perform.) Still, it feels very strange. The ending is structurally anticlimactic as well as sexually nonclimactic. Moreover, for an instant, Pryor has considered being a woman or a white man, or taking their positions. A performance that begins with a macho-racial verbal demarcation ends with a muted bit of imaginative role swapping.

The performance, perfectly symmetrical and rounded, has five acts. I do not mean to insult Pryor’s splendid talent for improvising his direction; what is less visible is his formal sense, which is at the attacking heart of comedy. (Comedy always registers an affront to form. Repressed form returns in the split-second structure of the joke, but if a comedian like Pryor

eschews jokes, it returns in larger units.) Act 1 is "A Racial Division of the Audience." Act 2 is "Animals." Act 3 is "DEATH." Act 4 is "Childhood, and Hunting with Father." Act 5 is "Machismo mocked, and Sexual Divisions Transcended." The fourth act restores Pryor to the childhood inspiration of his love of animals' expressiveness as illustrated in the second act. Act 5 divides the private world in half (men and women), as Act 1 had halved the public world (blacks and whites), though at long last divisions have been transcended. The whole play pivots at Act 3, "DEATH."

Death is the engine of Pryor's vision (he will almost get himself killed a year after this concert). Confronting it seems crucial in transporting him from apartheid to identification (1 to 5), and back from his parental failure to protect his animals (his monkeys die) to a childhood sense of harmless natural well-being (he hunts with his father but forgets the rifle), by means of a fantasy, from near the epicenter of Pryor's comic mind, of his father's death in the midst of sex (2 to 4). Black maternal sex is mourning, but black paternal sex is death itself, or, rather, black paternal death is sex itself.

Pryor seems so comfortable with the excremental vernacular and so pre-occupied with occasions when the body, neither self nor other, talks back, and so alert to occasions when it is the corpse that talks back to his body that you might be inclined to call his performance an erection, in a manner antithetical to David Letterman's, of abjectness. It does not, however, seem like that. It seems a repudiation of abjectness as a willingness to hear without rancor or prejudice one's alienable aspects making their democratic claim upon subjectivity. One needs a theory that allows potency to death and excrement as a way of defusing the explosiveness of their repression.

### iii. Excremental Vision

Norman O. Brown's "excremental vision" is a heroic willingness to look at the world's waste, which the death instinct takes as its product, without flinching.<sup>2</sup> Of course, everyone must acknowledge the world's waste in some way, but all the difference is in what you do with your knowledge. You may sublimate it, but this is to frustrate the death drive, which has erupted with a will, in the centuries since Luther, as unleashed capital and weaponry. Or you can incorporate excrement into your vision of eternal life: this is what Luther did in his century and what psychoanalysis, freed of its misguided allegiance to sublimation, can learn from religion to do in ours.

"Scatet totus orbis"—the pretty sentiment is Luther's as quoted in Brown, though it might as well be Pryor's. In both, the excremental vision is total



(Luther thought even good works fecal, manifesting an unrelieved dirty-mindedness that in our age only a comedian might endorse); it is not sublimated but incorporated; it acknowledges death at life's behest; it connects us to the world and its animal inhabitants rather than elevates us out of it. Add Brown's other great excrementalist—Jonathan Swift—to the mix, and you put the last feature of Pryor's excremental vision into relief:

The real theme [of *Gulliver's Travels*—quite obvious on a dispassionate reading—is the conflict between our animal body, appropriately epitomized in the anal function, and our pretentious sublimations, more specifically the pretensions of sublimated or romantic-Platonic love. (*LD*, 186)

It is probably clear what Brown would make of a performance that gamboled in animality, wallowed in excrement, revived at the verge of death, and arrived thereby at a tribute to human intercourse unmarred by idealizations. Brown's paragons are "that blessed race of horses, the Houyhnhnms . . . free from the illusions of romantic-Platonic love, or rather . . . free from love" (*LD*, 189). Recall Pryor's account of dog/minature horse relations. As opposed to flies, who "don't even mess with horse shit," "dogs don't have no racism"—which suddenly means that they are not only not averse to another species but also not averse to its waste. It is with a fine display of corollary non-Platonism that the Great Dane brags, "I don't know what it is, but I am gonna fuck it."

Brown might have been enraptured if he had happened to be in the audience at Long Beach that night, but there could have been a reservation. Not that Pryor was too graphic in his anal talk; only that it is uncertain where Pryor was taking it, and Brown, for all his critique of sublimation, wanted always to get somewhere with excrement. It turns out that Brown is a dualist despite all attempts to reconcile Eros and Thanatos; he cannot quite free himself of what sounds to a nonspecialist like sublimation. Brown values in Swift that Swift values in animality "the animal body." Yet Brown can condemn Yahoo animality as representing "the raw core of human bestiality" (*LD*, 189).

Brown's dualism comes out, I believe, by contrast with Thoreau, though when I was in college, I understood from an aside in a lecture that you could best redeem Thoreau as proto-Brown. There was acumen in the misjudgment, but it left in me the impression, through several decades of not actually reading *Life against Death*, that Thoreau was Brown's model. In truth, he is hardly mentioned. Here is the famous passage that Brown should have considered:

Few phenomena gave me more delight than to observe the forms which thawing sand and clay assume in flowing down the sides of a deep cut on the railroad through which I passed on my way to the village. . . . Innumerable little streams overlap and interlace with one another, exhibiting a sort of hybrid product, which obeys half way the law of currents, and half way that of vegetation. As it flows it takes the form of sappy leaves on vines, making heaps of pulpy sprays a foot or more in depth, and resembling, as you look down on them, the lacinated, lobed, and imbricated thalluses of some lichens; or you are reminded of coral, of leopards' paws or birds' feet, of brains or lungs or bowels, and excrements of all kinds.<sup>3</sup>

Yes, but we can see where Thoreau and Brown part company. For Thoreau considers excrement so thoroughly the clay of natural creativity here that it is uncertain it takes a nonsublimating heroism to model it. Brown wants psychoanalysis to learn from mysticism "a way out of the human neurosis into that simple health that animals enjoy, but not men" (*LD*, 311). That sounds simple enough, in the Thoreauvian way; but what Brown (not Thoreau) must confront is that presumably animals as opposed to humans have to reckon with death but not the death drive.

There is death, centrally, in Thoreau and Pryor, and even a sort of death wish, but perhaps no death drive. Corpses and excrement are not abjects for them, if abjection here means possession by the horror of death drive products and by-products, because their form of self-expression is self-distanced to begin with; they are outside themselves as the basis of their self-conceptions. They are so fully abject that nothing seems particularly abject, which is to say that, if they are obsessed with death, it is not by death as *against* life, which is also to say that their excremental vision is ecstatic but not visionary.

Can we draw a line, then, from Thoreau to Pryor as an evolutionary advance, even beyond Brown, in the expansion of excremental consciousness? No: we can draw the line but must deny the advance, because something odd has befallen the excremental vision in recent years; as a consequence, Thoreau as much as Brown needs to be repudiated as precursor.

#### iv. Excremental Revision

Not to make a mystery of it, the odd thing that has happened to the excremental vision is a queer thing. I have described Thoreau as if his vision were too excremental for Brown, since excrement is less incorporated into

Thoreau's world (as life must acknowledge death) than it is the essence of his world (vitality itself). Yet if Michael Warner is right about Thoreau, you should rather conclude that the latter is not excremental enough.<sup>4</sup> Warner's thesis is that Walden takes us not, as we had assumed, from summer to spring, but rather "from the imperative of having no waste to the imperative of enjoying one's waste." The problem is the implication that even your waste can be used, even your waste can be economized, in short, even your waste is not wasted. Warner grants that Thoreau longs "to undo the ascetic self-relation without which the notion of a self-regulating market society (in itself utopian) would be inconceivable"; but apparently Thoreau's "post-renunciatory utopia will have an ascetism of its own" ("EE," 163). The ideal of it will be purity, the elimination of waste qua waste. This amounts to a solution to Daniel Bell's cultural contradiction of capitalism, the antithetical necessities of wasting and saving. Warner's Thoreau is a (victimized) agent of capitalism's response to a threat, submitting an erotic, feminizing, excremental self-dissolution to an ascetic self-regard (171).

Brown might conceivably have agreed with all this: Brown too is expert in how the excremental vision can be channeled on capitalism's behalf, and how it can be perverted, in his words, as a "magic instrument for self-expression" (*LD*, 190). I doubt you can make a simple alliance of Brown and Warner as against Thoreau, however, because what Brown manages to leave out of his discussion of the excremental vision is any explicit consideration of homosexuality. Brown is all against the repression of anality, but anal sex, in his discussion, is itself shunted.<sup>5</sup>

Leo Bersani, like Warner and apparently for similar reasons, seems to invoke and ignore Brown at the same time. Bersani famously wonders, "Is the rectum a grave?" and his answer is yes, and that is what is good about it.<sup>6</sup> What lies buried in it is "the masculine ideal (an ideal shared—differently—by men *and* women) of proud subjectivity" ("RG," 227). So Bersani shares with Brown a passion for inviting death into our lives; a sense that the self-violence of the exercise will head off the global violence of self-assertive capitalism; and an approximation of where the death instinct can be corporeally located.

I say "approximation," however, because Bersani's vision is rectal without being particularly excremental. I am afraid, therefore, that though Bersani's is more pertinently sexualized than Brown's, it actually will seem somewhat regressive to Warner insofar as it shows no marked acknowledgment of waste. "Male homosexuality," writes Bersani, "advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self, and

in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of ascesis" ("RG," 222). Ascesis! It is not, I grant, the same ascesis that ruins Thoreau for Warner. According to Warner's rejection of it, asceticism is not self-loss, it is self-gain. The totalities, however, are the same: you can keep yourself or give yourself away, but you are ascetic if, either way, everything is consumed.

I need to hasten back to Pryor and place him in this array of excremental and rectal visions as follows. He is Brownian in anality, animality, and thanatocentrism. He transcends Brown into the vicinity of Walden, insofar as his excremental vision does not even begin with a division of Thanatos and Eros, but finds them indivisible, for example, at the moment of his father's death. The connection to Thoreau comes out in one of the eeriest moments of the performance, which I have saved until now. Pryor is hunting with his father; suddenly, he is all piety, and it is not false. He talks, almost in a whisper, about how quiet you must be in the woods: "It's almost like you know the gods are there." The tone and sentiment seem to hover for a moment between Thoreau's and Garrison Keillor's. The audience awaits the joke. When it comes, however, it is perhaps the one moment of the concert in which there is no recognition in the audience's laughter. "Something about nature, right, makes you want to [Pryor's silence splits the infinitive] shit." The audience is smart enough not to think that Pryor has reached for a crude shock; otherwise, they do not know what to think. They do not, assuredly, surmise that in the presence of the father who would die having sex, Pryor would not see pollution in the Thoreauvian intersection of divinity and defecation.

And finally the Bersani moment: what Bersani urges the world to learn from homosexuality, as against the lessons of either orthodox masculinism or standard feminism, is the joy of the under position, if the essence of sex is the burial of subjectivity. As if to endorse this point, at what should have been the climactic moment of his concert, Pryor imagines getting under a woman—*is* he the woman? Or a man being somehow penetrated?—and the concert ends with Pryor's "self-dismissal." But I would not call the moment ascetic, exactly, because of the inextricability of Pryor's identity and his abjectness, his fashioning and publicizing of self and his wasting of self. He is the shadow capitalist, maybe the underside of Warner's Thoreau, saving and wasting, but saving what he should waste, and wasting what he should save.

The project here is to understand how Pryor gets from his first gesture of the concert—instituting a local inverse Jim Crow based on the differential need of whites and blacks to use the de facto segregated toilets—to

the last, in which all membranes seem permeable in a waste-saving and self-wasting vision. *Scatet totus orbis* is the principle of the metabolizing of difference to sameness.

## v. Oceans of Mud

It is nearly impossible, Diana Fuss demonstrates, to consider psychoanalytic identification in celebratory terms; she divides the implicit Freudian conception of it into three parts: infection (or contagion), ingestion (or cannibalism), and fall (or entropy).<sup>7</sup> And she can document that when the issue is cross-racial identification, culture critics duplicate the Freudian wariness. Whites may try, as Kaja Silverman writes about T. E. Lawrence, to outdo natives at their own otherness, or whites may simply be looking to sample a little transgression—Gail Ching-Liang Low observes—that keeps all social rankings intact (*IP*, 148). These are two variants on ingestion, cannibalizing the natives.

The premise would seem to be that whites are always up to something, and perhaps most up to something when most sympathetic. But it would be naive not to notice that they can be out of control as well, and often enough most out of control when most up to something. Take the white response to rap: Houston Baker condemns the general white American ignorance of the phenomenon as a “willed refusal to engage a form that is preeminently young, black, and male.”<sup>8</sup> Yet

the paradox of this refusal . . . is an unwitting complicity in the form’s influence and spread. For example, many Americans—young and old, black and white—will “hiply” boast of their children’s (or some child’s, perhaps a cousin’s or nephew’s) familiarity with rap. (*BSRA*, 62)

So whites are most willful when most unwitting, in a conspiracy with the enemy’s cabal. There is a paradox at work here, Baker tells us, though he had previously warned us that it is not enough “simply to label rap a new, noisy mode of urban resistance that paradoxically appeals both to middle-class white youth and the black underclass” (*BSRA*, 61). Shall we call the syndrome a compounded rather than a simple paradox, since it is one paradox that middle-class white kids enjoy black urban art, and a second that scornful adults enjoy the first? Or shall we read Baker’s hostility to labeling as a sign of his dissatisfaction with the figure of paradox itself?

Dissatisfied or not, American culture critics have a hard time avoiding the trope. Cornel West, in a conversation with Anders Stephanson, describes the dilemma of jazz artists that to “preserve a tradition from main-

stream domestication and dilution,” they risked losing “contact with the black masses. In this case, there was eventually a move toward ‘fusion,’ jazz artists attempting to produce objects intended for broader black-and-white consumption.”<sup>9</sup> The sequential paradoxes are that to keep in contact with the undiluted black tradition, black artists began to lose contact with blacks, and that to produce a music appealing to blacks, they were forced to produce a music appealing to whites. Baker’s metaparadox arises from a secret, displaced fascination of white adults for rap; West’s from a hidden assimilation (whites desiring what blacks desire, then blacks desiring what whites desire in blackness) of black and white susceptibility to jazz. Paradox is the inevitable rhetoric, apparently, of unforeseen cultural permeability.

However, when his own attention turns to rap, West makes a valiant effort to transcend the language of paradox.

Rap [West tells his interviewer] is unique because it combines the black preacher and the black music tradition, replacing the liturgical-ecclesiastical setting with the African polyrhythms of the street. A tremendous *articulateness* is syncopated with the African drumbeat, the African funk, into an American postmodern product. (“CW,” 280)

At the beginning of West’s statement, traditional Afro-American elements are fused: preaching and music into rap. At the end, African and American, primeval and postmodern, tribal and consumerist cultures are syncopated. There is no question of susceptibility or dilution here (identification as fall from white or black superiority, respectively). Combination is the easier trope, though its facility is deceptive: preacher and music are *combined*, but street rhythm *replaces* the church, and the *combination* of pre-symbolic and symbolic (music and preaching) returns as the *syncopation* of them (drumbeat and articulateness). Syncopation is the uneasier trope, but better suited to the polyrhythmic complexities of the scene.

If rap “preeminently” and jazz before its “mainstream domestication and dilution” are black, then it is paradoxical to assert that they are or should be, equally, white. Paradox is what arises in such matters when you simultaneously grant and impugn notions of cultural origination and possession. This means granting and impugning, simultaneously, the Freudian trinity of infection, ingestion, and fall. What is most admirable in Baker’s decomposing of paradox and West’s slide from paradox to syncopation is the struggle to transcend the conceptual hopelessness and desperateness of the figure.

Yet Ishmael Reed, in his masterpiece, *Mumbo Jumbo*, treats identifica-

tion without the agony. And if he more than once remarks in that book that Freud missed an opportunity,<sup>10</sup> he does not mean that a mere theoretical revision on Freud's part would have changed the course of interracial politics. He only implies that another mode of identification was before Freud if meaningless to him, through which he could have provided the theory of an identification already in progress and only hysterically despised as cannibalism or contagion or chaos. What Reed is talking about, in effect, is the mode of identification of Pryor and his comedy society.

A character in *Mumbo Jumbo* named PaPa LaBas (whose hieratic status I will later summon Henry Louis Gates Jr. to explicate) "would never [Reed tells us] say 'If you've seen 1 redwood tree, you've seen them all'; rather he would reply with the African Chieftain 'I am the elephant.' . . . (*Freud would read this as 'a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole,'* which poor Freud 'never experienced')" (MJ, 45). A précis of *Mumbo Jumbo* is impossible, but suffice it here that it concerns a phenomenon called "Jes Grew," a kind of plague that from time to time infects whites with all the cultural attributes of blacks, and which nearly conquers America in the 1920s, when the novel mainly takes place, because the disease, if that is what it is, has entered America at New Orleans in that decade and headed toward Harlem in search of its "text." It is at the end of the twenties that Freud wrote, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, that he had never had the oceanic feeling, which is to say that he missed Jes Grew, and so could not himself be the one to textualize it.<sup>11</sup>

My impractical question might be put this way: what would *Civilization and Its Discontents* have been like if poor Freud had himself felt what Romain Rolland wrote to tell him about? And had therefore not been inclined to dismiss it merely as a remnant in certain fixated adults of the sense of indistinction they had experienced at their mothers' breasts and hardly the source of religious sentiment in general. The story of religion for Freud is, on the contrary, the story of the infant's "helplessness and the longing for the father aroused by it" (SE, 72): a story, in short, of privation and not fullness.

Here is the two-minute version of the birth of civilization according to Freud. First: sexuality in the male loses its ties to periodicity. Males therefore need to keep females close at all times, and females feel the urgency of keeping their young near the reigning pertinent male—hence, families. Second: "organic periodicity," of course, persists in females (i.e., the monthly cycle), but as testimony to the transcendence of it on the part of the male, taboos on it are enforced. Third: since visual, as opposed to olfactory, stimuli are perpetually, not cyclically, available, they begin to domi-

nate. Fourth (meanwhile): the power of olfactory stimuli has been diminished by the uprightness of humankind—this also fosters the primacy of the visible. Fifth: smelling is devalued in general; the repugnance of the menstrual smell is extended to excremental smells. Sixth: “Anal erotism, therefore, succumbs in the first instance to the ‘organic repression’ which paved the way to civilization” (*SE*, 99–100).

As a quick way of leaping to Richard Pryor, we might remark here that Freud believes he has demonstrated why humans have contempt for dogs. If it were not for their lack of olfactory shame, our contumely would be incomprehensible, in light of dogs’ superior ethics (100). Of course, Pryor expresses no contempt at all for dogs, whose olfactory shamelessness is their most admirable quality, epitomized by the ecumenical Great Dane.

I have another—less hit-and-run—point in mind. Freud’s theory of civilization may be loony, but what it reveals even in its looniness, as a symptom, is a hatred of body smells as a hatred of the abject, traceable to women’s sexuality. In Klaus Theweleit’s *Male Fantasies*, we are treated to the story of the German *Freikorps*, whose murderous hatred of Communism was only matched by their murderous hatred of women’s sexuality, one metaphorized and the other metonymized as the “Red Tide.”<sup>12</sup> The average *Freikorps*man’s feelings about the Red Tide are equal to the average white American’s about what Ishmael Reed calls regularly in *Mumbo Jumbo* the “black mud.” If the red tide—anarchy, equality, femininity—threatens the German male’s view of female innocence and thus German manhood, black mud is the American threat to the Virgin Land. The red tide and the black mud are what civilization experiences on the shores of the oceanic.

In Freud, the process of civilization begins with shame, but it proceeds in guilt. Uprightness produces shame and the triumph of the visual; shame is the agent of the repression of instincts, which produces aggression; aggression turns from its first target (the father) inward, carving out the superego. The superego is the result of an “identification” with the paternal authority (*SE*, 129), and that identification radiates outward. So *Civilization and Its Discontents* begins by denying that religion can be traced back to the mother and originary unity, ends by associating it with an “ever increasing reinforcement of the sense of guilt” (133). Freud’s favorite guilt comedian, he specifies, is Mark Twain (126).

But Pryor is not a guilt comedian—Pryor’s stand-up, as for example when his heart attacks him, does not prioritize the upright and upstanding—and we can refer to him, on Reed’s implicit suggestion, as an oceanic comedian on the proviso that we are talking about tides and waves of mud. Mud is the universal democratic solvent; it pollutes all distinctions between the



dead and the living, whites and blacks, prehistory and modernity, the vertical and the horizontal, as in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, published the same year as *Civilization and Its Discontents*. If Freud acknowledges that civilization begins with the shame of female sexuality, which is the shame of menstrual smell, he has before him another source of the oceanic besides milk. The formula for the earthier version of the oceanic would be mud = feces + mother's blood. Mud is the origin and substance of a less patriarchal religion than any that Freud considers.

In the central ceremony of the Black Mass [Brown tells us], as the Queen of the Sabbath lay prone, "the sacred host was prepared by kneading on the buttocks a mixture of the most repulsive material, faeces, menstrual blood, urine, and offal of various kinds." (*CD*, 207)

It is a stew of abject ingredients: we infer that the comedy of Richard Pryor is based on a radical overthrowing of abjectness all at once, not standing it up, in the manner of stand-up. Pryor cannot humor abjection, in the stand-up way, because he belongs to an abjected race. The black mass, Brown tells us, mixes feces, urine, and blood: these entail the colors of the world populations, coded by "whites." A white disciplinarian in *Mumbo Jumbo* wants to win back to whiteness a white radical by pitting their race "against the Legendary Army of Marching Niggers against the Yellow Peril against the Red Man" (*MJ*, 112). Is this not a shoring of whiteness against the elements—they run together without punctuation—of the Black Mass, against feces, urine, and menses? *Mumbo Jumbo* voodoo practitioners meet leaders of the Haitian resistance to American marine imperialism in a chromatically striking shiproom: "The colors of the room are black and red, the walls are red, the floor is black. A flag hangs from the ceiling upon which has been sewn the words Vin' Bain Ding, 'Blood, Pain, Excrement'" (*MJ*, 131).<sup>13</sup>

In *Mumbo Jumbo* what sort of phenomenon is Jes Grew? It is a sort of falling in of individuals: "Individuality. It couldn't be herded, rounded-up; it was like crystals of winter each different from one another but in a storm going down together" (*MJ*, 140). Or it is a kind of ingestion: "Jes Grew is the boll weevil eating away at the fabric of our forms our technique our aesthetic integrity" (17). Or it is, *passim*, a plague, though Reed stipulates that whites "did not understand that the Jes Grew epidemic was unlike physical plagues. Actually, Jes Grew was an anti-plague. Some plagues caused the body to waste away; Jes Grew enlivened the host" (6). Jes Grew exemplifies all of Fuss's Freud's metaphors of identification, though Reed negates their negativity: it is a fall of whiteness but a fall into community, a cannibalism

that resurrects the body, a plague but an antiplague. There is no positive term, apparently, for positive identification.

You could call it the oceanic feeling, but the ocean would have to be conceived of as merging with its shore. One white hysterically emotes, “The Black Tide of Mud will engulf us all” (169). There can be no sense of purification or elementality to this oceanic feeling. An overcome white “said he felt like the gut heart and lungs of Africa’s interior” (5). It delivers whites not only to the heart but also the innards of darkness, a place akin to Thoreau’s train bank, reminiscent of brains, lungs, and bowels, and “excrements of all kinds.”

Adam was made of mud, which, according to Norman O. Brown, means he was made of feces. The connection is not drawn in *Mumbo Jumbo*: Reed is talking about contagion that does *not* cause its host “to waste away”—though, on the other hand, it causes a superabundance of enthusiasm, joy, life, wasted energy from the point of view of white technologism.<sup>14</sup> Kids infected by Jes Grew “want to Funky Butt and Black Bottom” (*MJ*, 21–22), but the posterior component of the phenomenon is undertheorized in *Mumbo Jumbo*. And when Henry Louis Gates takes *Mumbo Jumbo* as one of his inspirational texts in *The Signifying Monkey*, a book whose scope I shall be taking advantage of, he does not excessively care about two aspects of the phenomenon he is studying: the excrementality of the “signifying monkey” and the oceanic mud central to Reed’s vision.<sup>15</sup> Signifying for men can be an oedipal contest (it is largely about clearing a space against authorities; in its “dozens” sub-version, it has its basis in oedipal insults). But there are other ways to take Gates’s own material.

The story of the signifying monkey is persistently phallic competitive, but its language is persistently anal egalitarian. The excrementality is so pervasive that it can mean anything in a story striving, against the excremental tide, to mean one thing. One version of the signifying monkey ur-story begins this way.

Deep down in the jungle so they say  
There’s a signifying monkey down the way  
There hadn’t been no disturbin’ in the jungle for quite a bit,  
For up jumped the monkey in the tree one day and laughed  
“I guess I’ll start some shit.” (*SM*, 55)

The monkey instigates a dispute between the lion and the elephant, and part of the metacritical interest is that Gates cannot decide whether to call this agitating a “mediation,” an “(anti)mediation,” or an “antimediation” (56). If, in racial terms, the monkey is black and the lion is white, what

would that make the elephant? Since the monkey creates a conflict between the lion and the elephant, you might look for his position in relation to theirs, i.e., they are the antagonists and he is the mediator; but the real conflict is between lion and monkey. There is some numerical or structural oddity here. We have three figures, but we do not have a Hegelian organization of them, nor is it obvious what human dialectic is being allegorized.

At any rate, “shit” means trouble at first. That is only one of its many denotations. After the lion returns to the monkey, having been thrashed by the elephant, the monkey taunts (signifies) him.

He said, “Whup! Motherfucker, don’t you roar,  
I’ll jump down on the ground and beat your  
fucking ass some more.”  
Say, “While I’m swinging around in my tree,”  
say, “I ought to swing over your chickenshit head  
and pee.” (57)

Here, excrement in one of its barnyard forms equals what the lion has become as the result of physical and verbal abuse—ass whipping. He has *become* abjectness and waste, outside and in. The next lines continue the signifying.

Say, “Everytime me and my old lady be tryin’ to  
to get a little bit,  
here you come down through the jungle with that  
old ‘Hi Ho’ shit.” (ibid.)

“Shit” now means false display. The monkey at this point is concerned to oppose his own phallic pursuit with the anality of the lion. But he seems to forget himself, forget that his own initial impulse was not to find a moment of private genital intercourse but to stir up some public excremental trouble. He falls from his branch, and “his ass must have hit the ground”; now vulnerable, he tries to apologize to the lion, who tells him,

“Apologize, shit,” say, “I’m gonna stop you from  
signifyin’” (ibid.),

where “shit” expresses contempt for the gesture.

The nuances of ubiquitous excrement are not Gates’s theme. But Gates traces the ancestry of the signifying monkey back to the trickster and translator between gods and humans, Esu-Elegbara (who is known “in the loa of Hoodoo in the United States” by the name of Papa LaBas, which is also the name of a character in *Mumbo Jumbo*); and the most famous Esu-Elegbara

story (*SM*, 32–34) begins with a similar act of trouble—my burden is to suggest that it is not gratuitous to conceive of it as excremental trouble.

The imbroglia begins when two men vow eternal friendship but do not remember or revere Esu in the act. So trickster Esu makes a cloth cap, the right side black, the left side white. One day, as Ayodele Ogundipe retells the myth, “the two friends were out in the fields, tilling their land. One was hoeing on the right side, the other was clearing the bushes on the left. Esu came by on a horse, riding between the two men. The one on the right saw the black side of the hat. The friend on the left noticed the whiteness of Esu’s cap.”

They argue over it. Esu—who caused the conflict, antimediator and mediator—now comes to settle it: “Both of you are right.” The lesson, according to Gates, is that there is no determinate vantage point; Esu is the patron saint of reader response. Esu reconnects the friends, but he had put them asunder in the first place; even reconciled, they seem to be united on the understanding that they will never share the same point of view. Thus, writes Gates, “what appears in a binary system to be a contradiction resolvable only by the unity of opposites is more subtly—and mysteriously—resolved by the Yoruba, in the concept central to the Ogboni secret society that ‘two, it becomes three’” (37). Say that the “two” are god and man in the anecdote—and then the men divide. Unlike the three-in-one of the Trinity, we have two-thirds.

Is Gates justified in finding interpretive relativism in the Esu story? For humans there are only partial truths, but Esu knows the whole truth, though it is not simple. Item: is Gates right to believe that the conflict of leonine literalism and simian figurativeness can produce a victory of the figural? The monkey does not triumph in the end, and the elephant is beyond the battle. If we take the monkey as black and the lion as white, then not the simian but the elephantine position is equivalent to Esu’s, beyond the color war.

I do not assume that the elephant’s position can be our own: beyond black and white, gray. And I do not see how to inherit Esu’s dislocation. But the elephant exists, even if it is not me; and the monkey, until he forgets his own essential excrementality, manages to get on his side. It is possible that remembering our own excrementality gets us on Esu’s side (or sidelessness) as well. According to the Yoruba creation myth, first there was air, air enlivened to water, air and water thickened to mud. “Then the mud is given form as proto-Esu” (36). Esu is himself liminal (between gods and humans), and the mud is two transitions back (almost proto-Esu, i.e., almost almost Esu, i.e., almost almost almost a god): creation is continu-

ous. Mud is substance and almost form, and gives rise to the form of Esu but not yet his substance. Mud, to put it yet another way, is where the world arrives at the form of Esu. It is not the abject within subjectivity; it predicts something divine beyond subjectivity. We may conceive, then, of *Mumbo Jumbo* as between the muddening Jes Grew and its eternal, absconded text. We may think of Pryor's comedy as located at the same juncture of excrement and the strictures of form: in the position of proto-Esu. It takes place, in effect, in the woods where "it's almost like you know the gods are there" and "you want to shit."

There is an audience. It is opposite—but not necessarily opposed to—the performer. It is normally the comedian's business to get everyone laughing together. But Richard Pryor comes on stage and instead of trying to make one out of two, he makes three. He wears a cap that is half black, half white, and it halves the audience: whites returning from the bathroom, blacks in their seats. It seems a misfortune for whites on the order of the morbid white fantasy in *Gravity's Rainbow* of having one's head in a toilet while being anally raped by Malcolm X. But then *The Crying of Lot 49*, whose spirit more nearly equals that of *Mumbo Jumbo* than that of any other work of recent fiction I know, becomes the analogue text: WASTE begins to spread unstoppably. We call this entropy, and Fuss mates entropy with the fall as a paradigm of identification. Jes Grew, however, is a force of negentropy, and whites and blacks come together.

The purpose of Pryor's opening is not so much to divide whites and blacks as to triangulate them. Once that occurs, they can be reunited—along with men and women at the end of the performance—on a new principle of identification. It is beyond the opposition of literal and figurative, lion and monkey (like Papa LaBas, Pryor declares, "I am the elephant"); it inserts itself between Esu's overview and the friends' resigned underview. It is where formlessness meets form, where mud adumbrates but is not yet Esu or Adam: the night, as Hegel almost scornfully said, in which all elephants are gray. Contagious laughter is the antiplague.

Pryor attempts to form a new nation on the model of a stand-up audience, as it crystallizes around a new type—or, rather, antitype—of comedian. Lenny Bruce is one precursor: David Letterman recovered the aggressiveness in Bruce's filial abjection, but Pryor recognized in the Spritz the potential for the liquidating of child into parent. The lineage can be traced to Rabelais: Gargantua's warrior mare, who "pissed so copiously that there was a flood for fifteen miles around," which has the effect of wiping out nearly an entire company of the enemy, seems a Brucean figure, and her discharge a Brucean concoction of aggression and tidal unity.<sup>16</sup> It is

Bakhtin of course who saw in such deluges (Pantagruel urinates another one) what we might call antiobjectness—since the aspiration is marginal joining rather than disjoining—with democratic potential for inundating social distinctions.<sup>17</sup> Pryor confronts a somewhat different problem—not individualism so much as groupism, a sort of gigantism, itself—so he plays not the giant but the ventriloquist, the cypher, Proteus, proto-Esu, finally the mime. He seems fluidity itself rather than its mass producer.

We get momentary views of the audience in the performance film. Whites seem to laugh differently from blacks: they thrust up their chins, a seemingly assertive gesture except that it makes vulnerable their jaws in all their glassiness. Meanwhile, blacks are laughing in the opposite direction, doubling over as if self-protectively, except that the reflex seems to register a jab in the solar plexus. The masculine metaphoric violence is justified by Pryor's occasional use of boxing as a model of comedy. But the noise produced by a Pryor audience is unifying: shrieks of laughter, mixed with clapping, hooting, and screaming, its volume intact for two to ten seconds duration. You can lose your identity in the high pitch: the embodiedness of the response to Pryor (whole body laughing) is exactly equal to its disembodiedness (whole audience laughing). Your body is not the point of distinction of ego and other; it is the point of convulsion.

## i.

The specific benefit of laughter is obliviousness. In this respect, laughter has a strange intimacy with pain. I have argued that laughter, like pain, is incorrigible: pain is the thing about which I cannot be wrong, and laughter is the thing about which *we* cannot be wrong. Pain is also, according to Elaine Scarry, universe contracting, and so is laughter.<sup>1</sup> Whatever its physiological basis (e.g., the contribution of jokes to surges of salivary immunoglobulin-A), the use of laughter to combat disease must have something to do with the capacity of pain and humor for creating exclusive, hence mutually exclusive, worlds. There is at least one obvious connection between the two attributes of laughter—it is incorrigible, it is apocalyp-

tic—that I have mentioned. It is not merely the intensity and the embodiment of laughter, but also its unfalsifiability, that obviates the world.

So I was not in the intellectual (i.e., thinking) mode when I registered that Ellen DeGeneres and Paula Poundstone were amusing me as female stand-up comedians. But this has come to seem to me a breakthrough. I have felt no resistance to appreciating the humor of women as expressed either in movies and TV or in real life—women’s humor seems to me to flourish in situations either more artificial than the stand-up setting or less. Or rather, the humor of women seems to me at its best when the artificial and the authentic exchange places: when the comic actress stylizes her own nature, and when the woman in actuality naturalizes a brilliant role.

Female stand-up comedians, on the other hand, had only earned from me a grudging laugh—which, from the point of view of the purist, is equal to an easy laugh—insofar as they joked about husbands, boyfriends, commitment, airline stewardesses, and PMS. These subjects are comfortable to laugh at, for men as well as for women; a knowing distance from the joke is available to everyone, and nothing interesting transpires between performer and audience. The tension of nature and artifice is diminished rather too easily in a complete triumph of the conventional, as in ancient mother-in-law gags. But the fascination of stand-up—and its identifiability in contrast to old-style comedy of the wicked mother-in-law variety—has everything to do with its essential abjectness; all stand-ups are abject insofar as they give themselves over to the stand-up condition, which is a noncondition *between* nature and artifice. (They are neither acting nor conversing, neither in nor out of costume.) Reality itself, in the way of the abject, keeps returning to the stand-up comedian, who throws it off in the form of jokes. Obliviousness is earned from moment to moment.

When I decided to forswear that hard-earned obliviousness—when I decided to notice what was in front of me as a first step—what I noticed was that both DeGeneres and Poundstone were wearing (were they costumes?) suits.

## ii.

If the end of stand-up is obliviousness, then it belongs to the genre of escapist art—what genre is that? I am not sure it has its theory yet; let me nominate Rodgers and Hammerstein as its best theorists.

This is not merely to say that their musicals are escapist, though they are. Take *The King and I*: the fantasy is that dictatorial paternalism converts to humorous pathos at the advent of a strong woman; part of the pathos is that



the dictator himself is oriental and the strong woman herself is occidental, so that the sexual outcome can only be the impotence of the beautiful patriarch. Or take *The Sound of Music*: again, the benevolent dictator, Von Trapp, is humbled by a strong woman (who arrives, as in *The King and I*, apparently to put a stop to the wanton production of children). Again, the strong woman is not sexually available for conquest—she is training to be a nun. Even the context of Nazism contributes to the escapism; Von Trapp can submit to the strong woman without its signaling absolute prostration, since his softening makes credible his heroic antifascism. Yul Brynner's role splits in two (Hitler/Von Trapp) to purify the escapism, which seems to involve complete gender freedom within perfect gender conventionality.

The interest of all this for me is that Rodgers and Hammerstein knew what they were doing and hid in their escapism a profounder escape. Both *The King and I* and *The Sound of Music* have metamoments: the Family Von Trapp performs its music on stage within the musical; the concubines of the King put on a play, *Small House of Uncle Thomas* (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*), within the play. Both metaperformances mask refusals to go on performing. On behalf of the musicals of which they are emblems, they define the point of exhibition as camouflage.

In *The King and I*, a Burmese concubine, Tuptim, has been torn from her husband, Lun Tha, who lurks around the King's palace for the whole musical. Tuptim is the adapter and narrator of *Small House of Uncle Thomas*, and during the performance in front of the King and his English guests, she comes out of her own narrative for a moment almost to make explicit the relationship of her enslavement to those portrayed in her play. She is quickly returned to her play by a glare and a snap of the fingers from Brynner. This has the effect of returning *Small House of Uncle Thomas* (mounted in a slave state, in the presence of imperialists, during the American Civil War) into a demonstration of the grace and poise of enslaved concubines that the British can find charming.

The Family Von Trapp performance at the equivalent crisis of *The Sound of Music* seems harmless when the family is singing "Do, Re, Mi," but somewhat more troubling when Von Trapp sings "Edelweiss." It is a complicated selection if you think about it, though you do not: his ideal of purely white nature and nation is not so different from the Nazis'. Perhaps we are permitted to assume that this is the cleverness of Von Trapp—to sing a hymn so close to what the Nazis want to hear that they can only suspect that the natural purity of Austria makes Nazis into a stain, like Jews. Then the Family Von Trapp sings "Farewell," which had been a charming song earlier in the musical when it attenuated the withdrawal of innocents from

adult worldliness; the Nazis, of course, cannot realize that it is adults who are now interested in escaping their party.

The escape in *The Sound of Music* succeeds. The escape in *The King and I* fails. The splitting of the King of Siam into Hitler and Von Trapp allows the Von Trapps to escape without implying the complete collapse of patriarchy, whose secret sweetness we have been dreamily contemplating. But the meaning of escapism is the same in both cases. The invaders miss the significance of *Small House of Uncle Thomas* in *The King and I*: in place of repudiation, they see beautifully disciplined concubinage. The invaders miss the significance of “Edelweiss” and “Farewell”: in place of repudiation, they see pure whiteness and patriarchal domestic innocence. They love what they see and they are not utterly wrong, because they see nearly what we do. We enjoy both performances, also, in the way oblivious fascists and imperialists do, if the musicals work for us at all. *Small House of Uncle Thomas* is a great success, and the audience applauds heartily; so is the Von Trapp performance, which wins first prize. During the applause, the escaping slave Tuptim does not appear, and everyone is amazed. During the applause, the escaping Von Trapps do not appear, and everyone is mystified.

Above all, don't performers want our applause? Possibly not as much as the audience wants to give it. Plays occasionally finalize claims to seriousness by denying audiences the right to approve. Applause is a relief from the strain of attention; it is an explosion of consciousness that had been compressed, much like laughter. We force, thereby, our return to profane space. Performers whose aspiration is formal perfection turn out to be human after all, and we worship their superiority on condition that they turn out to be our equals. They humanize; they are reembodied; they come back to time and entropy. On the cusp is our adulation and gratitude.

Marjorie Garber has written a compendious book on transvestism, one theme of which is the essential unity of transvestism and performance in general. Transvestism is the space of (not being or having but) seeming, to resituate Lacan's trinity. In this connection, she notes that the metamoment of *South Pacific* is the cross-dressing performance of “101 Pounds of Fun.”<sup>2</sup> This implies that the moment of applause is the antitransvestite, or call it the divesting, moment, when performers resume their profane identities, though still a moment before returning to their street clothes and natural faces. For a moment they are like stand-ups, between nature and artifice. The surprise is that that moment of abjection or return is in Rodgers and Hammerstein the moment of disembodiment or flight. The theatrical scene (literally transvestite in *Small House of Uncle Thomas*, in which all

parts are played by women) is doubly false. It *seems* escapist—it seems to seem—in order to camouflage the actual escape. The escape that turns sex into seeming (that makes it possible to believe in the hidden phallus of women or the hidden emptiness of tyrants) masks the escape that eliminates bodies altogether. In the process, escape becomes the provenance of the performer, not the audience. This is akin to humor if Kant is right to consider the joke as strained attention that suddenly finds itself looking at nothing.

I want to consider escapism in reference to Ellen DeGeneres and Paula Poundstone as the evacuation of the star's body at the moment it is evoked.

### iii.

Paula Poundstone, first of all. What to do with her body is one theme of her HBO performance at Harvard, and part of its form as well. A running distraction is whether she will decide to get behind her stool—her only prop—or in front of it, or whether, sitting on it, she should scrunch one leg or even both her legs onto the top bar.<sup>3</sup> In a bit about finding herself on a one-passenger flight, Poundstone claims that the crew asked her to move for ballast. To illustrate this denigration of herself to pure mass, she removes one leg from the top rung of the stool and thrusts it out stage left.

From such discomforts, shouldn't her suit be liberating? Poundstone seems large on stage; standing above us, the stand-up comedian always seems larger than he, usually "he," is. It would be difficult for the typical stand-up comedian, even if he so desired, to disavow the phallicness of his position, and one move a female comedian, not wishing to consternate her partly or mainly male audience, might make is to play dumb, Gracie-style. Even a woman as publicly smart as Ellen DeGeneres will take up dumbness as a posture, represented as the incapacity for remembering her point. But Poundstone, attracting an audience of both sexes, sometimes mainly of women, might be able to fool with the phallic position more committedly or comfortably. And transvestism, the space, as Marjorie Garber would have it, of seeming, might for such a purpose be the best space to occupy.

So it is time—we seek all revelations of necessity at the end—for Poundstone to take her bow. We would expect this to be the divesting moment: what will Poundstone turn out to be beneath her suit? If she had been an actress, there would have been no problem. Clothed by applause, she might have chosen to stay in character or drop it. But for a comedian, neither exposing himself or herself nor quite playing a part, the moment is ontologi-

cally obscure, as in the case of Andrew Dice Clay. In Poundstone's case, her multicolored suit, over (it is revealed to us) her baggy underwear, would seem to double her comedian's position in the zone between artifice and actuality. She is already, during her act, where an actress arrives during the applause. So where, during the applause, can Poundstone go?

She ends her act, the audience cheers. Then Poundstone is gone; the Harvard Band marches on stage, playing "Ten Thousand Men of Harvard." It feels terribly abrupt. Among the things we want less of at that moment is the Harvard Band, and the one thing we want more of is Poundstone. She had been an intimate of the audience's for the length of the act: half the act was joking with selected individuals. She had become so familiar that it seems crushing to be suddenly abandoned.

Then we—video watchers—realize that Poundstone has not left us, abruptly, forever. She is in the band—she is playing the tuba. The HBO camera picks her out, but it probably takes the live audience a moment to spot her. Poundstone reappears on stage in stages—but as what? Not in her suit nor yet in her civvies, she has stuffed herself into yet another uni-sex uniform, above which we can pick out her face, somehow reminiscent of the chiseled faces of Hollywood actresses of the last black-and-white era, and the revelation of the real but partially secreted Poundstone is the revelation of a partial disguise. Finally, the camera follows Poundstone off-stage. Now she exists only for the HBO audience, not the Harvard audience. Poundstone, by herself, is actually trying to play the tuba. Is there a well-documented category of abjectness devoted to phallic flatulence? The star's body has not disappeared, exactly, but the moment of ostensible appearance has been redefined as a restaging of the complexities of escape. Seeing Poundstone again, we realize that we had not seen her yet. Her familiarity itself has been defamiliarized. If for the Von Trapps and the slave, Tuptim, the moment of applause reveals by their unavailability for it that they are now in flight, for Poundstone the moment reveals by her presence at it that she had been escaping all along.

#### iv.

If I may translate Lacan into less doctrinally specific language, then what he is urging about the play of "being" and "having" (being and having the phallus, to put the matter with doctrinal specificity) amounts to this. Insofar as  $x$  is the object of  $y$ 's desire,  $y$  (weaker) wants to be what  $x$  (stronger) does not have.<sup>4</sup>  $Y$  cannot simply have what  $x$  does not have and offer it: if it is disposable, it is precisely not what  $x$  wants. But of course  $y$  cannot be

what *x* does not have, either, because what *x* wants is generic and complementary, and *y* is specific and discrete. Thus “seeming” in Lacan is a necessary third term: seeming protects having and being from reality. *Y* wants to seem to be what *x* wants to seem to have.

For Marjorie Garber, the space of seeming is the place of the transvestite, who plays phallic hide-and-seek, and Paula Poundstone and Ellen DeGeneres are both mild transvestites on stage; but my argument is that they are not so much seeming, on stage, as seeming to seem. I mean to argue that this is equal to disappearing. To get at how this works, I want to consult the locus classicus of these dialectics: Gabriel Marcel’s *Being and Having: An Existentialist Diary*.<sup>5</sup> At first glance, Marcel’s opposition of being and having would appear to share nothing with Lacan’s. “Being,” for one thing, is no mere *gerund*. What Lacan and Marcel have in common, however, is a fascination with what in human experience is detachable.

Marcel would usually say disposable, that is, under one’s control, sacrificeable. The difference is that he tends not to believe in the disposability of anything important, whereas Lacan would seem to believe that detachability is the source of a thing’s importance. From Marcel’s view, for example, the body is not really disposable—even, paradoxically, by suicide (*BH*, 82–83). My body is mine, but it is also me. The world already fails to split into subjects and objects, without going farther into it than one’s flesh (12). Corporeity is the “frontier district” between being and having (82), and pain, which drives my body into me (my body when it is in pain seems me rather than mine to the extent of the pain), is the frontier guide for conducting having into being (85, 86, 115, 144).

The project of this essay is to find in the disappearance of DeGeneres and Poundstone at the divesting moment the revelation of a technique—based in laughter as opposed to pain—for making the conversion of having into being impossible.

I want the being/having/seeming trinity to work out, in part, because the title and mantra of DeGeneres’s best-selling book is *My Point . . . And I Do Have One*.<sup>6</sup> The joke is, of course, that she insists she has a point even as she reveals that she does not, but of course she only *seems* not to have one; the punch line is the point. That is to say that the apparently unwitting revelation of female blather is clothing for the concealed weapon, the masculine punch. But this is all to say what DeGeneres has and seems to be. Who is she?

Or who is Paula Poundstone? She seems knowable; in her stand-up routine, she speaks about herself, sometimes intimately, and asks us in the audience about ourselves. The funnier half of her Harvard concert is her

extended colloquies with the audience. The open egalitarianism of the approach, however, is limited by the running gag: that this is Harvard but the audience keeps saying inane things. One student seems so unsure what she is supposed to be learning in a class that Poundstone commandeers a cellular phone to call her roommate; gradually Poundstone, by interrelating her conversations, builds up a whole little society of Harvard vacuousness. It is difficult to estimate the ratio of hostility and affability in this, which is itself part of the interest. The hostility provides the laughs, but at the same time it obscures the shift of attention from what Poundstone is and has to what the audience is and has.

Poundstone picks out an audience member: "What do you do?" she wonders. It is not unheard-of as a conversational gambit, but improvising comedians use the question so often in their routines that it gives pause. Why wedge such a dull opener into a routine that needs energizing? The answer is that there is a charge to it in the stand-up setting, because stand-ups at their deepest are in awe of the fact that people do *anything*. Stand-up, in the minds of comedians, is a way of continuing to do nothing. A precondition of the popularity of the *Seinfeld* show (on each episode of which, contrary to universal opinion, a lot actually happens) is that we concur. In the cultural imagination, stand-ups like, formerly, poets are adored for (what seems to be) their simple devotion to being. Poundstone interviews one member of the audience:

PP: This guy here with a red tie. What do you do for a living, sir?

RT: Engineering.

PP: You do engineering? Where do you do your engineering at?

RT: Mechanical engineering.

PP: "Mechanical engineering." Can you see that's a "what" and not a "where," sir? . . . Sir, get off the script, damn it. . . . It's as if you went over it in your head before you left the house. I'll tell her "engineering" and then I'll tell her "mechanical engineering." I don't care what anybody asks me, I'm only gonna say, "mechanical engineering."

When it turns out that the mechanical engineer develops new furniture, Poundstone asks, "Somehow the chair isn't good enough anymore?" The engineer replies that he develops new chairs for prisons; this calls down a barrage of questions, the last one of which is:

PP: What were you told before you invented your last chair?

RT: Pricing.

PP: Because the prisoners are cheap?

And the joke here, as I understand it, is Poundstone's suspicion that Red Tie really does nothing—he is working from a script. Similarly with the student: does she really go to Harvard? Does she actually attend classes? Why can't people account for what they do?

This means that people cannot account for how they go about being adults. Work is the successful outcome of childhood. Being turns into doing to the extent that one grows up, perhaps goes to college, and gets a job. The unfortunate corollary is that, insofar as adults identify themselves by what they do, they identify themselves by one of the most disposable of the things they have. Even a job close to one's self-definition can seem an arbitrary consequence of the transition out of childhood. Stand-up comedy, I want to hypothesize, works to protect being not by cultivating pain that drives having into being but by a reversal of all that Gabriel Marcel most cherishes: by disposing of all that can be disposed of, so that being has, to the extent possible, nothing at all to pain it.

But Poundstone makes another claim on adulthood: here is what she has.

## v.

"I have two foster daughters," says Poundstone, whereupon the subject immediately becomes clothing and gender. It is a bad time, Poundstone complains, for buying clothes for kids. She hates buying pink frilly things for girls; what is the decisive difference between boy and girl babies that requires such a dramatic distinction of outfits? Only the penis and vagina define the difference, Poundstone asserts, adding (so that we know she still is close to the infantile position she describes) that "this is only the third time in my life I ever said those words."

Does DeGeneres have a baby? Near the beginning of her recent CD, *Taste This*, DeGeneres shares some personal feelings with the audience.<sup>7</sup> The hard thing about the job of comedian is the traveling: three-and-a-half weeks are too long to be on the road. She is forced to ask friends to water the plants, turn on the lights, and "make sure that the mobile over the crib isn't tangled or the baby's gonna get bored. [laugh] So that's, you know, hard to impose on people. [pause] I don't have a baby; I have a mobile and a crib. [laugh] I just have 'em. I enjoy those things; I don't know why."

DeGeneres continues: "I want to have a baby. I don't want to *have* the baby. I just wanna [very fast:] have-a-baby."

She concedes that "it's a beautiful thing you end up with—I'm aware of that. But I want to have a new washer and dryer but I don't think I'd go through *that* for *that*."

She does have a goddaughter, who is “the light of my life. She’s three [pause] or five, or something. She lives clear across town—I don’t have that kind of time.”

What does all this baby talk amount to? The answer begins with the observation that DeGeneres and Poundstone are both forced to acknowledge parenting as the most inevitable form, for a woman, of having. On the other hand, the most inevitable form of having for a stand-up—controlling the mike, talking down to us, solely erect—is having the phallus; in Freudian terms, of course, penis envy ought to be redirected in the former direction and not the latter.<sup>8</sup> (Joking is an all-male sport in Freud.) This would not be worth mentioning if it were not the kind of judgment a comedy audience is conventionally as ready to make as Freud. The phallic comedian is funny on the proviso that his phallicness is merely one more encumbrance—that he is rather than has or does—but the female comedian begins by seeming to usurp the phallus. Poundstone grants the obligation of facing the problem in her depreciation of the penis as a determinant of baby clothing; the effect is to shift attention from phallus to baby without conceding that the latter is merely a surrogate of the former, and then from the baby to the baby’s clothing, as a realm of perfect newfound freedom (her baby’s or, by extension, her own).

DeGeneres’s approach to the bind is especially subtle. Her technique, first of all, is always to seem to assert that she has children, as for example, again, in her book, when she describes her typical day: “Okay, that brings me to around six o’clock when I go pick up the kids from day care. Not my kids; I drive a van for the neighborhood moms who are busy” (*MP*, 171). The effect is always of un-having the baby. Babies are apparitions in DeGeneres’s life. They are always verbally constructed and then jokingly deconstructed: DeGeneres supposes and DeGeneres disposes.

The joke gets more complicated when DeGeneres claims not to have a baby but to have, anyway, a crib and mobile. In the CD routine, this is merely because she enjoys them. In the book version, she also wants to be prepared; she has a nurse, and “in case I decide to have a baby, it’s nice to know that Bok Choy is there” (73). But even Bok Choy’s function gets attached to DeGeneres’s own regressive pleasure: “To keep him in practice, I have him read me a bedtime story every night and occasionally I let him burp me.”

It is safe to say that self-babying is never far removed among DeGeneres’s temptations; being burped by Bok Choy is as sensual a pleasure as she ever, in stand-up routines, reports. It is as if the correct outcome of penis envy for her is the subversion of Freudian/Lacanian wisdom: the phallus becomes



the baby, all right, but the baby and not the phallus becomes her. (It may be worth noting that on *Ellen*, in a season devoted to the coy delay of “Ellen’s” coming out as a lesbian, the only people who came out early in the season were her parents, who came out as heterosexuals, against the horror of which DeGeneres literally started babbling baby talk.) Key for my purposes is that if Poundstone discusses children produced, for her, painlessly (they are foster children), DeGeneres hovers around the painfulness in order to jettison it more imaginatively. “I don’t want to *have* the baby—I just wanna have-a-baby.”

Having a baby in the sense of parturition means separating from it, though having a baby, in DeGeneres’s imaginary sense, means possessing it. But possessing it means possessing it as a consumer good, like a washer and dryer, which means possessing it as a disposable item. That is how, in the stand-up ethos, anything at all is possessed, so possession turns out just to mean constant separation, whenever the tour schedule demands it. Everything is always left behind, detachable, alienable. If pain, according to a Christian existentialist, forces having into being, then DeGeneres uses laughter, as the antithesis of pain, to detach being from having altogether. The end, for Marcel, is universal being, being that finds the universe increasingly indisposable to infinity. The end, for DeGeneres, is evacuated being, which finds the universe disposable down and into the body itself, as if the body were a baby one chooses not to have.

## v.

It is difficult by glancing to tell the title of Ellen DeGeneres’s book. In large letters, at the top, is “ELLEN”; in somewhat smaller letters, at the bottom, is “DEGENERES.” In between is a picture of DeGeneres, and to the side of her face is, in somewhat smaller letters yet, “MY POINT,” followed by an ellipsis, and then in quite small letters, “AND I DO HAVE ONE.” It looks at first glance as if the title is “Ellen,” which is of course the title of her TV show. “My Point . . . And I Do Have One” looks like the gratuitous digression—between Ellen and DeGeneres—that the asseveration itself is meant to head off.

The title phrase appears twice in the book. In the first instance of it, DeGeneres is discussing “ridiculous fears” (e.g., “Fear of combing your hair so hard your head bleeds while your date is waiting in the front room” [MP, 109]), which takes her to the subject of the “boogey man.” Here, infantilism fails as escape, which forces DeGeneres off on a digression: “boogey men” reminds her of K.C. and the Sunshine Band and their song, which

DeGeneres “danced to . . . as much as the rest of you in 1975” (110). Then: “But I digress. My point . . . and I do have one, is that I still get scared at night. Every tiny creak, every little noise, I open my eyes wide and listen with them.”

The iteration of the phrase comes in the middle of an anecdote set in Maine, which DeGeneres momentarily confuses with Montana. DeGeneres is camping when she hears “some kind of noise”: “Since I’m alone in the middle of the woods, I’m a little bit scared” (145). It is, however, only a family of deer—“mother, father, and two little baby deer”—drinking from a brook; their cuteness causes DeGeneres to think, “I wish I had a gun.” No: she did not have that wish or fantasy, but she did go camping in Maine. No: she never went camping in Maine, but she did spend some nights at the Hilton on Maui. Finally: “My point . . . and I do have one, is that I was being sarcastic. I don’t understand hunting at all.”

It is evident what causes DeGeneres to digress: fear. In the first story, the digression is away from the fear, because fear is the point. In the second story, fear is the subject of the digression (that she is scared in the woods is a baroque way to introduce her antihunting message). In both cases, the fear is of being alone in uncertainty; in both cases, DeGeneres hears a noise whose origin she cannot see. I hope it is not illicit to force the form of DeGeneres’s stand-up onto the content: she digresses, she blathers to get the alien noise out of her head and her own noise substituted for it.

Terrors, by the time DeGeneres is, by calendar measure, an adult, have not been transcended but have been transformed. Once the terror has been redefined, not as natural or supernatural but as human, for example the date waiting in the parlor, aloneness becomes not the source of DeGeneres’s terror but the best defense against it: she becomes the baby doe whose only hope is to avoid the ones with guns. This is a self-destructive syndrome for a performer, but a good breeding ground for escapist art. It is as if DeGeneres chatters to an audience to palliate fears whose origin is also the audience.

Someone recently wrote a letter recently to a magazine recently (and you know it must really be recently since I’ve mentioned it so many times) asking, “Why does Ellen DeGeneres always wear pants and never skirts?”

I’m guessing that the person who wrote that letter meant skirt, a noun signifying an article of clothing, and not skirt, a verb defined as, “to evade or elude (as a topic of conversation) by circumlocution.” Because, if they mean the *verb* skirt, well, they’re dead wrong. I’m always skirting. (93)

She is skirting here, in fact, with violent decisiveness: to skirt is to digress is to escape is not to explain wearing pants.

Then DeGeneres returns to the point—she wears pants because at summer camp she was “tattooed with designs of bougainvillea,” which provoked an attack of bees; this “point” has the look of another skirting, unless you remember that DeGeneres had recommended explaining sex to children in terms of male bees buzzing around the queen (77). Is DeGeneres approaching a confession? For a millisecond, she seems to want to.

All kidding aside—actually, I change my mind. I don’t want to put all kidding aside. I want the kidding right there in front where we all can see it. The main point of this book is kidding. If I put all kidding aside, there would be nothing left but nonkidding, and believe me, that wouldn’t make a very interesting book. (94)

In sum: DeGeneres wants to get to her “main point.” She wants to put her main point, exhibitionistically, in front for all to see and not aside. Except: kidding is her point. She does not allow her kidding to revert to nonkidding the way she allows her imaginary kids to revert to nonkids. (If skirting is not having to explain not wearing skirts, kidding is not having to explain not raising kids.) Which is to say: digression itself is the point. What she does not wish to put aside is the aside. The presence she is after is disembodied and absentminded.

It is unfair to be judged by appearances [DeGeneres continues]. Even though I don’t wear skirts, I know I’m a girl. . . . I’m a person who’s a woman, and I don’t like dresses or panty hose or heels. I guess you could chuckle and say that I’m a woman trapped in a woman’s body. But, if you did say that, nobody would know what you meant, and probably more than one person would ask you to kindly stop chuckling. (94–95)

I should probably allow DeGeneres’s mot—“I’m a woman trapped in a woman’s body”—to shine by its own brilliance. I want, however, to attach three addenda.

1. The witticism may represent the only moment in the book that does not feel like skirting. The meanings of the terms finally coalesce—DeGeneres does not skirt why she does not skirt.

2. But witticisms of this sort—the sort that do not skirt—are precisely what the inquisitive public is not supposed to welcome. DeGeneres does not

expect anyone to find humor in the horror of her perfectly fitting entrapment.

3. Skirting is refusing to put “all kidding aside.” What is made visible—“right there in front where all can see it”—is evasion. Joking is the camouflaging of camouflage: what we do not see is the evacuated stage.<sup>9</sup>

## vi.

Who is Ellen? This is the question that DeGeneres keeps posing, only to keep on posing it. The first words of the book are “Who am I?” (*MP*, 3); by the end of the book, the question seems not merely a formal device for instigating an answer. A comedian has, I have mentioned, an odd relation to his or her identity, caused by the indiscretion of role and reality, personality and character, having and being. A comedian whose name is Jerry Seinfeld playing a character named Jerry Seinfeld is perhaps the limit case. A comedian whose name is Ellen DeGeneres playing a character named Ellen Morgan in a show called *Ellen* (after the character? after the star?) comes close. This sort of imbrication is almost unheard-of in a dramatic series.<sup>10</sup>

I call the comedian’s position abject for the following reason. A fascination with what is detachable may be fetishistic if its object is a distraction from what one fears to lose, what one fears one has never really possessed. A fascination with what is detachable may be abject if it concerns what one fears cannot be lost, what will always return. It is not anxiety about the cutting off of the penis that causes abjectness: it is anxiety that fingernails, hair, excrement, and the corpse itself will always be with you, despite all cuttings, excretings, and burials. These are symmetrical unhappinesses in the realm of the disposable. To Lacan, one’s relation to the phallus is basically fetishistic, since we choose not to face its unpossessibility. To Marcel, one’s relation to the body is (this is not his term or tonality) abject, since the failure of the subject/object binarism is—in the first place—based on its undisposability.

In the case of comedians, the appearance of phallicism implicit in stand-up itself is what makes the abjection funny. But the source of the phallus’s power is, as always, its detachability: it is the detachable mike that comedians adore, which is to say that abjection produces a fetishistic relation to anything that can come off. The thing, on the other hand, that always returns to comedians is their lives, apparently, and it may seem dismaying or disgusting. The close approach of having and being seems to a comedian,

as opposed to a Christian existentialist, dreadful. From what one can gather from understated autobiographical interludes of her book, DeGeneres's early life seems to have been filled with fears, self-loathings, cruelty, two-way incomprehension—and so on, the usual abject comedian's fare. She was, for one thing, "a little hefty" (*MP*, 8), and you feel that her subsequent losing of weight is tantamount to abandoning her old life. This is the extreme fantasy of disposability. (Possibly one can feel in her wish to have-a-baby without having one the shame of that old weight.) The point is to lose everything for the sake of some essence of "Ellen."<sup>11</sup>

So using "Ellen" as the title of her show does not seem to fictionalize its signified. It seems to protect it from attributes. The show *Ellen* was originally called *These Friends of Mine*. It seems, in retrospect, a particularly misguided title: the characters on the show who surround DeGeneres are rather uninteresting, compared for example to the Seinfeld rectangle, or even the group around Candice Bergen in *Murphy Brown* or the ensembles that supported Bob Newhart in two shows or Mary Tyler Moore. The thing to notice on the *Ellen* show is the curious Oz-ish bubble that envelops DeGeneres as she interacts—charmingly, generously, on "regular" terms (it is unclear to me whether I am describing the character or the actor)—with her "friends." *These Friends of Mine* placed an awkward weight on the having mode—but being is the show's essence.

In a chapter of *My Point* called "Ellenvision," DeGeneres begins: "I feel extremely lucky to have my own TV show."

I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'm so happy that my show is as good, and as based in reality, as it is. (59)

Are we one step behind, here? This sounds like plausibly modest gratification. Yet can DeGeneres, a plexus of insecurities, hesitations, and self-effacements, along with their compensations and overcompensations, be registering simple contentment with what she has? And whatever could "reality" mean to her in a book that mixes fantasy, invention, autobiography, opinion, and "material" (jokes without ulterior motive)? Is DeGeneres as happy with the realism of the show as she is with the realism of her next sentence?

You wouldn't believe some of the shows that were offered me by network executives before I accepted *Ellen* (which, by the way, is named after Ellen Burstyn).

What follows is an attempt to suggest that everything DeGeneres does, including playing with coming out or actually coming out as a lesbian, is

meant to protect the pure, attributeless, Ellen. That is to say that “Ellen” needs to be protected so thoroughly from the life of Ellen DeGeneres that it might as well be attached to the life of Ellen Burstyn. Poundstone’s abjection is interesting, and I shall consider it briefly, but I mean to concentrate on DeGeneres’s project of founding her comedy on abjection by treating all her biography as an encumbrance, by making a point of the digression between Ellen (“MY POINT . . . AND I DO HAVE ONE”—even the metapoint survives an ellipsis) and DeGeneres.

vii.

Paula Poundstone begins her HBO routine at Harvard by announcing that her body is all pain to her. “I wish I had a degenerative disease. I’m tired and achy all the time, anyway.” This remark leads to a discussion of the guy in the wheelchair on Wal-Mart commercials: Poundstone begins with abjection (the mortifying body makes a nice reference to DeGeneres) and wishes not to be cured of it but to exacerbate it. She wishes to slough her body entirely. This is the context in which to locate her first conversation with a member of the audience, early in the concert.

PP (to student): What are you studying?

Student: Women’s Studies.

PP: So are you getting credit right now? [lots of laughter] I am, by all accounts, a woman.

That is: a woman trapped in a woman’s body. Thus when Poundstone says (in dialogue with a blind man, wondering about the compensatory power of his other senses), “I don’t have sex so I always assumed that I’d have expertise in another area. . . . If I played croquet I’d be really fantastic,” we assume that the joke is not merely based on the *Lysistrata* protocol (frustrated sex is funnier than sex).

Poundstone is almost literally at pains in her routine to get across that “I don’t have sex. I’m not intimate with people. I don’t have friends.” She takes her foster child to a bookstore while a reading of once-banned books is in progress; she is forced to distract the child from a passage of *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* that apparently has much to do with heavy surf and sunrises. Poundstone comments: “None of it was ringing a bell. I am no expert on sex—for sure—but this was not something vaguely familiar to me.” The one time she had sex that was “not totally horrible,” she thought of it as at best a “freshly stirred glass of Tang.”

You might sense in the judgment a description of *heterosex*: perhaps

Poundstone found sex with men so distasteful that she realized her own lesbianism. But no: "Sex has never been my area—which is good. My campaign contributions can be accepted on all quarters. I don't have that side. No one is much attracted to me and I don't care to be much attractive to anyone else." She is in fact a lesbian. She makes this last remark in a diatribe against homosexuals who aspire to donate money to Dole: how can this be? "We disapprove of our *own* lifestyle? We beat *ourselves* up in parking lots?" The way to forestall beating oneself up in parking lots is not self-approval, however; it is abjection so complete that Poundstone is disincarnated by it.

The desire, even as a joke, to have a degenerative disease is the desire not to have any body at all: to have so much pain as to finish it off. The desire not to have desire, in fact, is not the challenge so much as the essence of the joke. If joking can alleviate pain by distraction from the body, it can (the logic of joking would go) eliminate pain only by fantasizing the destruction of the body.

#### viii.

In DeGeneres's book, her HBO concert "One Night Stand," and her CD, there is perhaps one reference to homosexuality: in a bit about "Trivial Pursuits," she quotes the question, "What is the only animal that mates while going 80 miles per hour?" and admits that "Danny Kaye was a bad guess." Her own body only appears in her routines as something to keep covered.<sup>12</sup> In "One Night Stand," she is amazed by the premise of a health farm: "They want you to be naked to get rid of stress." Her CD culminates with a reflection on public toilets, which begins with the embarrassed response she gives when she has left the door unhinged and someone barges in accidentally: "That's okay." This leads to an extended fantasy on what would occur if the intruder, having taken the remark literally, returned with friends: "Get the ramrod, this one is tight."

Possibly DeGeneres's defining routine is "Scary Things." The running joke is that she keeps referring to scary things as maximally scary until she flashes on a scarier thing; then at the end the bit turns absurdist, in the manner of an Escher staircase, when the ultimately scary thing is a lamb, and DeGeneres is forced into contortions of paralogism to get the lamb to seem the ne plus ultra of frightfulness. The first scary thing is a spider in a shoe, then baby spiders in the other shoe, then a snake up the leg. (Does this seem like parenting in reverse?) Next:

You're on a beach playing frisbee with a friend or not even a friend just somebody you're attracted to and they had a frisbee. . . . And they throw the frisbee . . . and it goes into a cave and you're like spelunking into the abyss of the cave . . . and you're like, "hey, how come my frisbee feels squishy?" and all of a sudden you realize what you're squeezing is a bat.

The bat bites her on the ear, and sharks attack the blood. And next she is going to look for a "thing," to get out of a house occupied by a perverted uncle, and what she finds herself squeezing this time is the lamb.

It takes no formal training to register that the descent into the abyss followed by the squeezing of the squishy thing reads like a sexual nightmare. It all begins with a game of frisbee with someone DeGeneres is attracted to—what is the relevance of that digression? The bat cave is where the infatuation repairs after the beach.

DeGeneres goes Poundstone one extra depletion. If Poundstone has only infrequent and joyless sex, DeGeneres is almost asexual in her stand-up presentation. To say that her sexuality is of the Peter Pan variety sets off a myriad of implications in the Marjorie Garber vein: let us say that DeGeneres has one sort of sexuality submerged in one sort of presexuality.<sup>13</sup> She is attracted on the beach to a "they," and no doubt the "they" is a "she," but the fantasy of the bat cave sounds exactly like the sort of nightmare that Freud analyzes: it will turn out to reveal some sort of misconceived sexual disturbance in the life of the child (the bat girl) that only later will cause hysterical symptoms in light of advanced sophistication. It is unclear whether DeGeneres wants to land us, or whether she in fact manages to land herself, in the childish inconceivable trauma or in the adult revisiting and symptomizing of it. Possibly the laugh here is in the regressive ambiguity. Is knowledge of the body repressed or unlearned? Is the body itself decoded or disclaimed? Do bats and frisbees stand for birds and bees, or for something more primitive or infantile?

Where is DeGeneres heading? On the front of the book, between ELLEN and DEGENERES, there is Ellen herself, smiling at the prospective buyer or incipient reader with great gratifying normality. This picture can be described, but there is little to be gained by describing it. It is a picture of Ellen DeGeneres.

In the picture on the back, Ellen is sitting in a corner of a room. She is pulling her legs in tight against her body. One hand is around one ankle; the other hand is against the other. One knee is pulled up to the level of Ellen's bowing head; the other knee is lower. The reason one knee is higher



is that Ellen has one foot up on a low parallelepiped of some kind, which she is sitting on in the corner, and the other foot on the floor. The thing she sits on in the corner is unknown to me; it is perhaps three inches high, a foot wide for sitting, two feet long, and it is snug into the corner of the wall. It has an oblong hole, maybe three inches long, in its width. An opening? An opening to a trap?

We do not see Ellen's face: she is looking straight down into the small gap behind her knees. We are faced only by her cropped hair. What on earth is she doing? First of all, she is hiding, in a childish way: by contracting her body into as tight a space as she can in the restricting corner of a room. She is attempting to make herself minuscule; she wants to be too enfolded for any assault.

Second of all, she is hiding by a less common stratagem. The wall behind her and to her side is white. The floor and box beneath her, either naturally or as the result of shadows, are white too but almost gray. The color scheme is mimicked by Ellen's clothing: whiter shirt, white but grayer pants. Her socks are white. She wears white sneakers with whitish-peachish laces. Her arms seem to be tan, probably inadvertently, and she has on rings and a bracelet, but she has her arms exposed for a purpose, and what they do is exhibit the body that is trying to furl toward the wall. Also, her head, shoulders, and the curve of her arms form a kind of zero. Her circle of hair is blond; under the circumstances, blondness reads like blandness reads like blankness, another zero, like a dumb blond stone on the ring of curving shoulders and arms. She is trying to be the room, a chameleon who works not by color but by colorlessness.

She is doing one thing more. On the front cover, she faces the camera, smiling so ingratiatingly that we seem to recognize her as the girl next door we never knew. The space between the essential "Ellen" and the historical "DeGeneres" is almost entirely filled in: the comedian is merely the woman herself on stage, no more artificial than that. So what is Ellen doing on the back? She is so recessive that we do not register, at first, what she is doing with her head. She is bowing. She bows her head in shame, perhaps, having been banished to the corner for committing some indecency. She is also taking her bow, at the end of her performance. Her moment of pride is equal to her moment of shame. (She is an inverse Lenny Bruce, whose shame existed to be displayed as pride.) This is the essence of stand-up.

Ellen goes yet further inward: at the conclusion of the performance, at the divesting crisis, what we get is some hint of retransvesting (sneakers, pants, cropped hair) subsumed in Ellen's overwhelming desire not to be clothed at all or naked either, not sitting or standing, neither ashamed

nor proud, but to be unborn, rewombed—the obvious term for her posture is fetal—like all her unhaved children. If her book were a musical—*Ellen!*—enwombed is where she would be by now. The ideal hypothesis of stand-up—that pain is shunted when abjection is stood up—has been transcended; Ellen's last hope is that if you carry abjection far enough into the infantile, all pain is consigned to an unspeakable future. But this is the end of stand-up.

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## Notes

### Introduction

- 1 Steve Allen made the 80 percent estimate. I heard him make it, but I cannot footnote the occasion. In 1975 Samuel S. Janus conducted an extensive polling of comedians, interviewing 55 nationally known stand-ups (51 were men). Unfortunately, he did not summarize their religious affiliations, except to say that a majority were Jewish. He also refers to his sample as “homogeneous in terms of religion” (173), which suggests much more than a majority, though he notes that, as of 1975, diversity was on the increase. In 1992, Ronald L. Smith compiled a list of 138 stand-up comedians or teams without regard to era, though the list was heavily weighted toward the present; my estimate is that around 40 percent are Jewish. Although the evidence here is sketchy, it is clear that the percentage of Jews among nationally known stand-ups has declined from 1960 to 1975 to the present—possibly it has halved.

All of Janus's 55 reported themselves to be heterosexual. I do not infer from this that they were. All I need to know is the apparently unanimous sense of the importance of that presentation. Whether or not these Jewish men were heterosexual, they were heterosexual for America. See Samuel S. Janus, "The Great Comedians: Personality and Other Factors," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 35 (1975): 169–74; and Ronald L. Smith, *Who's Who in Comedy: Comedians, Comics, and Clowns from Vaudeville to Today's Stand-Ups* (New York: Facts on File, 1992).

- 2 A brief justification for thinking of the Kennedy assassination as a turning point in the history of stand-up will come in a footnote to chapter 4. The comedic moment I am beginning to describe is a function of the Eisenhower years, though for Brooks and Reiner and for Nichols and May, the fruition of their careers together seems timed to present a correlative to the election of Kennedy. Whatever it may mean, and I do not begin to speculate about it in this book, such paradigmatic Jewish comedians as Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce felt it essential to their stand-up acts to present heterodox views of the assassination, sometimes to the detriment of humor. The history of stand-up went another way.
- 3 See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
- 4 I have this from Robert A. Stebbins, *The Laugh-Makers: Standup Comedy as Art, Business, and Life-Style* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990). Stebbins has it on the authority of *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. The first use in the *OED* is also from 1966.

# 1. Inrage: A Lenny Bruce Joke and the Topography of Stand-Up

- 1 See Sigmund Freud, "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious" (1905), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1960), 8:125–27 (hereafter abbreviated *SE*).
- 2 See Paul E. McGhee and Jeffrey H. Goldstein, *Handbook of Humor Research*, vol. 1, *Basic Issues* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983); see esp. Marianne LaFrance, "Felt versus Feigned Funniness: Issues in Coding Smiling and Laughing," 1–12; and Paul E. McGhee, "The Role of Arousal and Hemispheric Lateralization in Humor," 21, 23, 28. The gender disparity comes with the following caveat: women can distinguish between their laughter and their sense of funniness if "instructed to do so" (23). My own caveat is that the book was published in 1983; conceivably, women are more suspicious of their laughter now.
- 3 In these three theorems, I make no attempt to distinguish contemporary stand-up (or, since stand-up was named in or around the year of Lenny Bruce's death, stand-up per se) from ancestral, vaudeville forms of comedy performance. This chapter is based on an early essay, and I saw Lenny Bruce as unusually resistant to these intimacy criteria; in fact, contemporary stand-up is generally resistant to them. Nevertheless, the audience-performer intimacy is still in place, which lends interest to the

struggle; you cannot understand contemporary stand-up abjection without acknowledging that intimacy as a first step.

- 4 See Albert Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen—Lenny Bruce!!* (New York: Random House, 1974) (hereafter abbreviated *LB*). That Bruce was outrageous was such a cliché that it annoyed Bruce (41). On the moral outrage of his audience, see 277. On his own moral outrage, see 473.
- 5 From the record, *To Is a Preposition, Come Is a Verb* (Douglas, 1964?). I borrow the convention of dividing the joke into breath lines from *Breaking It Up! The Best Routines of the Stand-up Comics*, ed. Ross Firestone (New York: Bantam, 1975).
- 6 See Jerry M. Suls, "Cognitive Processes in Humor Appreciation," in McGhee and Goldstein, *Handbook of Humor Research*, 39–57.
- 7 See Mahadev L. Apte, "Humor Research, Methodology, and Theory in Anthropology," in McGhee and Goldstein, *Handbook of Humor Research*, 183–212; for ritual clowning, see *ibid.*, 188–92.
- 8 Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 92.
- 9 Lenny Bruce, *The Berkeley Concert* (Reprise/Warner, 1969).
- 10 Lenny Bruce, *The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce* (Fantasy, 1959).
- 11 Cf. Carl Hill, *The Soul of Wit: Joke Theory from Grimm to Freud* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 133ff. Hill believes that modern Jewish humor began in the Enlightenment; self-mockery was part of a general critique of difference that would make possible universal rationality and assimilation for Jews. I read Hill's excellent book after writing this essay, or else I would have alluded to it more frequently.
- 12 See, for example, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970), 161.
- 13 That Fanny Brice had to feign her Yiddish I learned from Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 563.
- 14 M. P. Baumgartner, *The Moral Order of a Suburb* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 56.
- 15 This is not quite true. I have described Bruce's humor as occurring at the intersection of urban *Yiddishkeit* and Protestant suburban civility, which would seem to leave Catholics out of the equation; but it is likely that much of Bruce's troubles came from Catholic indignation. Bruce speculated at his Berkeley concert that he was arrested in New York for making fun of Cardinal Spellman; Goldman produces evidence that he was arrested in Chicago for jokes about the pope (*LB*, 398–99). City Catholics, apparently, were able to make a last stand against the sort of civility that demanded Bruce's affronts. But this is perhaps a variety of not getting the joke, and the remainder of my thesis is that the law, despite its obtuseness, did.
- 16 See Paul E. McGhee, "Humor Development: Toward a Life Span Approach," in McGhee and Goldstein, *Handbook of Humor Research*, 123–24. See also Samuel S. Janus, "The Great Comedians: Personality and Other Factors," *American Journal of*

*Psychoanalysis* 35 (1975). Janus notes that the fathers of his fifty-five well-known comedians were “described for the most part as either absent, uninterested, or overtly disapproving” (171). He observes elsewhere that 80 percent of the comedians had been, at some time, in psychoanalysis, out of a need for “a power struggle with an overwhelming father” (172), and that the technique for winning the struggle was to turn the psychoanalyst from father into audience, inviting him to the show. Psychoanalysis, apparently, can replace the law as nostalgia for a never experienced, fully engaged antagonism, which the comedian wishes to charm.

- 17 See Janus, “Great Comedians,” 173. Janus looked for successful child comedians, but found none. Also, many comedians in his study felt that being young was a comic handicap.
- 18 Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), x.

## 2. Nectarines: Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks

- 1 I shall be quoting from three records in which the character appears: *2000 Years with Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks* (World-Pacific, 1960), *2000 and One Years with Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks* (Capitol, 1961), and *2000 and Thirteen* (Warner, 1973).
- 2 Some good work has been done. For a poststructuralist, Freudian account of humor, see Jerry Aline Flieger, *The Purloined Punch Line: Freud, Comic Theory, and Postmodern Texts* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); for a rival, historicizing account of Freudian humor theory, see Carl Hill, *The Soul of Wit: Joke Theory from Grimm to Freud* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993); on the postmodern politics of comedy, see Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992). It would have been helpful to read Mark Simpson’s “The Straight Men of Comedy,” in *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics, and Social Difference*, ed. Stephen Wagg (New York: Routledge, 1998), 137–45, before writing this essay.
- 3 Cf. Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), esp. the chapter “Jokes.” Douglas describes a joke as a “play upon form” (92). We differ, however, when she goes on to say that the frivolity of a joke is in its “exhilarating sense of freedom from form in general.” I think Douglas underestimates the formal requirements of the joke itself.
- 4 See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 163–67, 182–212.
- 5 Janus, “Great Comedians,” 173. Amazingly, this study by an academic psychologist concludes that “none of this sample were homosexual,” as if this could be known. The next sentence reads, “While this seems unusual for show business, it apparently reflects the situation for comedians”; note also this similar remark by a comedian named Mark Breslin, who is asked a question not about homosexuals but about

- women in comedy. "Stand-up is one of the last bastions of male heterosexual machismo in show business. . . . Very few homosexual males are in stand-up comedy. This is very interesting considering there are so many in the theatre and music" (quoted in Robert A. Stebbins, *The Laugh-Makers: Standup Comedy as Art, Business, and Life-Style* [Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990], 105).
- 6 Reiner is quoted in Kenneth Tynan, "Frolics and Detours of a Short Hebrew Man," *New Yorker*, 30 October 1978, 47.
  - 7 René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).
  - 8 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 22–27. See also Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210.
  - 9 Wayne Koestenbaum, *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
  - 10 Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 66–73.
  - 11 It should be noted for accuracy's sake that the added third party, in Freud's aggressive jokes, is male; in Koestenbaum's aggressive poetry, it is female. I assume this is because joke tellers, unlike twentieth-century poets, do not need so unsubtle a disguise for the nature of their originary, concealed dyad: the usual joke, unlike the usual poem, *is* the disguise.
  - 12 Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 110–46. I shall now quote Johnson's quoting of "Derrida's quotation of Lacan's paraphrase of Poe's quoted narration." The passage refers to shifting triangles in the Poe story (King, Queen, Minister; police, Minister, Dupin) in which "the second [as it were, point] believ[es] itself invisible because the first has its head stuck in the ground, and all the while let[s] the third calmly pluck its rear" (115). Johnson extends this metaphor to the dyadic relationship of Derrida and Lacan, by way of a transformation of Poe's even-odd guessing game into a head-tail guessing game, thus making available a pun: "But if the complexities of these texts could be reduced to a nice combat between ostriches, a mere game of heads and tails played out to determine a 'winner,' they would have very little theoretical interest. It is, on the contrary, the way in which each mastermind avoids simply becoming the butt of his own joke that displaces the opposition in unpredictable ways and transforms the textual encounter into a source of insight" (119).
  - 13 I apologize here for information I cannot document; I heard Reiner reveal all this far in advance of my realization that I would someday need to footnote it.
  - 14 Tynan, "Frolics and Detours of a Short Hebrew Man," 101.
  - 15 That Huck and Jim's routines have at least a whiff of minstrelsy about them was first broached by Ralph Ellison in his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," reprinted



- in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 45–59. For further discussions of the minstrelsy dimension of *Huckleberry Finn*, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), esp. 31–37; and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), esp. 88–92. (Fishkin agrees with D. L. Smith, among others, that Jim gets the better of Huck in the “King Sollermun” debate, 89). I have invented Huck and Jim as Reiner and Brooks’s precursors on a suggestion of Bill Brown’s; I have tried to historicize Reiner and Brooks’s comedy on a suggestion of Brown’s and the editors of the *Yale Journal of Criticism*.
- 16 Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Modern Library, 1993), 72.
  - 17 *Ibid.*, 118.
  - 18 If Jim is merely a Bones or Tambo, there is little connection in this regard to the 2000-Year-Old Man. But—leaving aside disputes about the accuracy of minstrelsy dialect—I agree with almost all of Fishkin’s thesis that Twain’s knowledge of black dialect is an insider’s knowledge.
  - 19 See John Morreal, ed., *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987). This is Schopenhauer from *The World as Will and Idea*: “The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity” (Morreal, *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, 52).
  - 20 Sigmund Freud, “Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious” (1905), vol. 8 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1960).
  - 21 Lott, *Love and Theft*, 164.
  - 22 *Ibid.*, 163.
  - 23 Stefan Kanfer, *A Summer World: The Attempt to Build a Jewish Eden in the Catskills, From the Days of the Ghetto to the Rise and Decline of the Borscht Belt* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), 227.
  - 24 Michael Rogin, “Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 417–53.
  - 25 Charles W. Stein, ed., *American Vaudeville as Seen by Its Contemporaries* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 254.
  - 26 Black performers, unable to revert to whiteface, could only deny themselves even such directness as vaudeville allowed. “Most Negro performers work in a cubicle,” Sammy Davis Jr. wrote. “They’d run on, sing twelve songs, dance, and do jokes—but not to people. The jokes weren’t done like Milton Berle was doing them, to the audience, they were done between men on stage, as if they didn’t have the right to communicate with the people out front” (quoted in Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—the Underground Tradition of African-American*

*Humor That Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994], 372). It may be too obvious to add that Berle developed his own method of not appearing directly before his audience: his transvestism defused the usual threat.

- 27 Carl Reiner, *Enter Laughing* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958).
- 28 Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 90.
- 29 Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 568–69.
- 30 I apologize again for information recalled from preacademic days: again, it is from an interview with Reiner that I remember garnering that there is such an excised section.
- 31 One of Brooks's Borscht Belt routines inaugurated his devotion to the comedy of belated reorientation. Brooks himself recalls the bit as follows: "The girl and I walked out from the wings and met in the center of the stage. I said, 'I am a masochist.' She said, 'I am a sadist.' I said, 'Hit me,' and she hit me, very hard, right in the face. And I said, 'Wait a minute, wait a minute, hold it. I think I'm a sadist.' Blackout" (quoted in Kanfer, *Summer World*, 227). All of Brooks's tardy discoveries (that ladies exist, that Joan of Arc is female, that, when he is impersonating an actor, the word for his vocation is "Thespian" not "lesbian," that Reiner thinks that FAG means "fag," that the role of sadist is much preferable) are sexual misidentification jokes, with Brooks at long last resuming the male heterosexual position.
- 32 Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Scribner's, 1970), 116.
- 33 Donald Ogden Stewart, *Aunt Polly's Story of Mankind* (New York: Doran, 1923); and Stewart, *A Parody Outline of History* (New York: Doran, 1921).
- 34 Stewart, *Parody Outline of History*, 160.
- 35 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 244–45.
- 36 Brooks more than occasionally reveals that he finds something funny in the idea of fruit per se. Also: in a recent and brilliant episode of the TV sitcom *Mad About You*, Brooks, playing Paul Reiser's uncle, serves him a drink that he worries is too peachy; Reiser, obviously happy just to be in Brooks's presence, replies that it is "just nice" in tribute.

### 3. Analytic of the Ridiculous: Mike Nichols and Elaine May

- 1 Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Kritik of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Macmillan, 1892), 224 (hereafter abbreviated *KJ*).
- 2 See Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 19ff.
- 3 Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 83.
- 4 Longinus, *Longinus on the Sublime*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), 141 (hereafter abbreviated *LS*).
- 5 See Steven Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime: Milton to Coleridge* (Cambridge,

- Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 73, *passim*. See also Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line: Essays in Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
- 6 *Ibid.*, 82.
  - 7 Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 180.
  - 8 Hertz, *End of the Line*, 161–215.
  - 9 Sigmund Freud, “Medusa’s Head” (1922), vol. 18 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 273–74.
  - 10 Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime*, 77.
  - 11 Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981), 255.
  - 12 A full discussion of Phyllis Diller and sublimity would include Burke’s belief that “ugliness I imagine . . . to be consistent with an idea of the sublime,” if it is “united with such qualities as excite a strong terror.” See Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Idea of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 119. Kant defines the grotesque as sublimity in combination with unnaturalness (*Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, 55). Thomas Weiskel thinks that grotesquerie is the form that the sublime takes “to please us” in our post-Romantic irony (*Romantic Sublime*, 6).
  - 13 On the back of *An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May* (Mercury, 1961) (hereafter abbreviated *E*).
  - 14 On the cover of *E* and also *The Best of Mike Nichols and Elaine May* (Mercury, 1965) (hereafter abbreviated *B*).
  - 15 *Improvisations to Music: Mike Nichols and Elaine May* (Mercury, 1958) (hereafter abbreviated *IM*).
  - 16 *Mike Nichols and Elaine May in Retrospect* (Mercury, 1972). Thanks to Neil Hertz for identifying this album to me.
  - 17 Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 101.
  - 18 For Nichols’s biography, see H. Wayne Schuth, *Mike Nichols* (Boston: Twayne, 1978). Elaine May’s father was the Yiddish actor Jack Berlin (see liner notes to *E*).
  - 19 Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10, 11.
  - 20 Noelle Oxenhandler, “The Eros of Parenthood,” *New Yorker*, 19 February 1996, 47–49.
  - 21 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Boston: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 59–60 (hereafter abbreviated *SL*).
  - 22 See in Weiskel, “Logic of Terror,” in *Romantic Sublime*, 83–106.
  - 23 See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Office of the Scarlet Letter* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

#### 4. Journey to the End of the Night: David Letterman with Kristeva, Céline, Scorsese

- 1 The *Family Feud* audience was asked in the early 1980s to “name an intellectual.” The winners in the poll were Henry Kissinger, William F. Buckley, Jr., Joyce Brothers, Tony Randall, and the host of the show, Richard Dawson, himself.
- 2 Bill Zehme, “Letterman Lets His Guard Down,” *Esquire*, December 1994, 101.
- 3 *Good Morning, America*, 11 May 1995.
- 4 Around 1974, Johnny Carson told something like the following joke about one of the Watergate burglars, let us say Liddy (let us guess on 15 October 1974, when Liddy was released on bail): “Did you see that Gordon Liddy was released from prison? [pause] He didn’t have the right idea, though. [pause] He went home and broke into his house.” To extrapolate the Mort Sahl joke idealized by this one, insert the word “own”: “He went home and broke into his own house.” Carson, having established the premise of his joke economically but deliberately, races to the punch line so as to arrive there a split second ahead of his audience; the final word makes an abrupt pop, and the audience, propelled momentarily into the silence, as if in a car that stops short, is jolted into laughter. Sahl arrives a split second later: the audience is alerted to the joke by the extra word and a facetious drawling tone in Sahl’s voice (also slowing the delivery) and a wicked smile. This is partly a function of Sahl’s insecurity (he needs to let the audience know he has amused them), but partly also a result of his desire to keep his audience depressed (emotionally and hierarchically low).

If this book had remained a cultural history, I would have used Carson as the first term of the perfectionist moment of stand-up: Carson perfected the Mort Sahl political joke; George Carlin foolproofed Brucean profanity. (Later, Robin Williams would take the risk out of Jonathan Winters.) Dick Cavett, especially as a writer, was the perfect joke perfectionist: he could write for both Sahl and Carson. Just as the Kennedy assassination made the Beatles in America, so it also gave impetus to Carson’s reign. In both cases, ethnicity was subsumed, and sex and violence technologized.

- 5 I am not sure how everyone is in possession of the first anecdote. For the remark about Carson, see Fred Schruers, “Man of the Year: David Letterman,” *Rolling Stone*, 29 December 1994–12 January 1995, 32.
- 6 From Frankfurt to Birmingham, tv criticism has increasingly propped up its object, the tv audience. First proclaimed to be absorbed and catatonic, then peripatetic and distracted, the tv audience is now conceived of as interactive and contumacious. For variations on the Birmingham view, see Stuart Hall et al., eds., *Culture, Music, Language* (London: Hutchinson, 1980); John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (New York: Methuen, 1978); Andrea L. Press, *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991). The point of my own essay is to explain how the tv audience as well as the tv star can be symmetrically and simultaneously absorbed, peripatetic, and interactive.
- 7 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1 (hereafter abbreviated *PH*).

- 8 For Céline as symptom in Kristeva, see Leslie Hill, "Julia Kristeva: Theorizing the Avant-Garde," in *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, ed. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (New York: Routledge, 1990), 137–56.
- 9 Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954) (hereafter abbreviated *VBN*). All translations, unless otherwise stated, are from Ralph Manheim, trans., *Journey to the End of the Night* (New York: New Directions, 1983) (hereafter abbreviated *J*, 1983). Occasional reference is made to John H. P. Marks, trans., *Journey to the End of the Night* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1934) (hereafter abbreviated *J*, 1934).
- 10 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 52.
- 11 See "Céline, USA," a special issue of *SAQ* 93 (spring 1994). One recurring theme is the pervasive Jewishness of Céline's American audience; the phenomenon is first remarked by Morris Dickstein, "Sea Change: Céline and the Problem of Cultural Transmission," *SAQ* 93 (spring 1994): 205–24, who notes the influence of Céline on Heller, Roth, and the sick comedians.
- 12 See Samuel S. Janus, "The Great Comedians: Personality and Other Factors," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 35 (1975). Of his survey of fifty-five leading comedians, "only three . . . reported that anyone other than their mothers really understood them." Fathers were almost always absent or disapproving (171).

##### 5. Scatology: Richard Pryor in Concert

- 1 I will be working from the performance film, *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert*, dir. Jeff Margolis (MPI, 1979).
- 2 Norman O. Brown, *Life against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*, 2d ed. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1985) (hereafter abbreviated *LD*).
- 3 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Norton, 1951), 324–26.
- 4 Michael Warner, "Walden's Erotic Economy," in *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*, ed. Hortense J. Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991), 151–74 (hereafter abbreviated "EE").
- 5 Brown writes these words without, apparently, considering their meaning for homosexuals: "The persistently anal character of the Devil has not been emphasized enough. The color preeminently associated with the Devil is black—not because of his place of abode (a circular explanation) but because of the association of black and filth" (*Life against Death*, 207). Nor does he seem to care about their meaning for blacks.
- 6 Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987): 197–222 (hereafter abbreviated "RG").
- 7 Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995) (hereafter abbreviated *IP*).
- 8 Houston A. Baker, *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 61 (hereafter abbreviated *BSRA*).

- 9 Anders Stephanson, "Interview with Cornel West," in *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 279 (hereafter abbreviated "CW").
- 10 Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Atheneum, 1972), 45, 209 (hereafter abbreviated MJ).
- 11 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), vol. 21 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961) (hereafter abbreviated CD).
- 12 Klaus Theweleit, *Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, trans. Stephen Conway, vol. 1 of *Male Fantasies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
- 13 Cf. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, trans. Erica Carter and Chris Turner, vol. 2 of *Male Fantasies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Theweleit's analysis of the Nazi colors puts white into relation with the abjectness of red and black this way: "Black is the color of forbidden love between men, of a dance of death in dark, deranged ecstasy. . . . Red is female flesh wallowing in its blood; a reeking mass, severed from the man" (283).
- 14 Ellis Hanson critiques the metaphor of the rectum as a "'dark continent' men dare not penetrate," and quotes Randy Shilts on AIDS as a version of going native: "This was so African [Shilts writes]. Here was a man whose intestines were being sucked dry by incorrigible amebic parasites, just like some African bushman" ("Undead," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss [New York: Routledge, 1991], 331). Reed creates in *Jes Grew* an inversion of this metaphor: blacks are the origin of a *healthy* contagion whose origin is the dark continent.
- 15 Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) (hereafter abbreviated SM).
- 16 François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. Burton Raffel (New York: Norton, 1990), 85.
- 17 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968). For comments on excrementality that make it distinctly the opposite of the abject (and not at all a product of the death drive), see esp. 175, 335.

## 6. Skirting, Kidding: Ellen DeGeneres and Paula Poundstone

- 1 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- 2 Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 121. The having/being/seeming trinity is from Jacques Lacan's essay, "The Signification of the Phallus," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 281–99.
- 3 *Paula Poundstone Goes to Harvard*, HBO, 3 February 1996.
- 4 See Lacan, "Signification of the Phallus," 289: the child wishes to be the phallus in order to satisfy the mother. Also, a woman wishes to be the phallus in order to serve as "the signifier of the desire of the Other" (289–90). This amounts to self-fetishization

(290), which I translate as the frustrated willingness to be complementary and generic.

- 5 Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having: An Existentialist Diary*, trans. Katherine Farrer (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) (hereafter abbreviated *BH*).
- 6 Ellen DeGeneres, *My Point . . . And I Do Have One* (New York: Bantam, 1996) (hereafter abbreviated *MP*).
- 7 Ellen DeGeneres, *Taste This* (Atlantic Records, 1996).
- 8 Sigmund Freud, "Femininity" (1932–36), vol. 22 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), esp. 128–29.
- 9 Since Joan Riviere's influential essay, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929): 303–13, it is generally appreciated that every woman is a woman trapped in a woman's body. This is to say that the conjunction of sex and gender, once the heart of the notion of naturalness, is now seen as the essence of artificiality. (The artificiality of that conjunction, in her essay, is exemplified by the university lecturer who jokes to maintain it [308].) For another relationship of the joke to the masquerade, see Pamela Robertson, "'The Kinda Comedy That Imitates Me': Mae West's Identification with the Feminist Camp," in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 156–72.

Judith Butler, in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), wants to understand how "normative criteria" are not "simply epistemological impositions on bodies" but, rather, "specific social regulating ideals by which bodies are trained, shaped, and formed." That is: the woman's body is formed deliberately just for the purpose of the trapping of women. Camp—as Robertson argues—may be one way to make something of the inevitability of this incarceration. Mainstream stand-up comedy, as performed by women, works another way: not by exaggerating the body as the thing a woman most definitively has, but by depreciating the body as the sort of having that essentially entails disposing.

- 10 See Susanne Langer, "The Comic Rhythm," in *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 67–83. Langer considers laughter a natural but problematic evocation of comedy (i.e., comic drama). It is problematic because it "appears to be a direct emotional response to persons on the stage," and so seduces our attention from the full, organic presentation of vital feeling (80). Thus she seems to be no friend of stand-up (81), which, as I argue, muddles the distinction of art and life altogether.
- 11 My conception of abjection, as usual, comes from Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

Butler, in *Bodies That Matter*, refers to the "abjected body" of the lesbian. I am not sure precisely what she means—more than rejected or scorned, surely. She seems to mean merely this when she writes that heterosexuality is "secured through the repudiation and abjection of homosexuality" (111)—the ambiguity is in the tension

of repudiation and abjection, since what is abjected cannot be repudiated. But then Butler adds that the “abjection of homosexuality can take place only through an identification with that abjection, an identification that must be disavowed.” This seems accurate. In short: the lesbian body is abjected insofar as heterosexual bodies cannot get rid of it. Butler defines one goal of her study as the “reworking of abjection into political agency”—this is close to the goal of stand-up, with a different source of agency in bodies that dematerialize.

See also Elin Diamond, “The Shudder of Catharsis in Twentieth-Century Performance,” in *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (New York: Routledge, 1995), 152–72. The essay concerns Karen Finley’s performance art, which is centered on the abject as, in Kristeva’s terms, “the place where meaning collapses.” According to Diamond, Finley produces—out of an indulgence in the abject—cathartic shudders, i.e., gestures at once bodily and meaningful. DeGeneres (and to a lesser extent, Poundstone) would seem to be essentially non-Finley: laughing is the strongest alternative to shuddering.

One final allusion: to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), esp. her essay with Michael Moon, “Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little-Understood Emotion,” 215–51. The essay considers “glamour” in the star Divine, defined as the interface between “abjection and defiance.” This is one way of “reworking abjection,” as Butler puts it; Finley would seem to be after a similar conjunction that does not accept its glamour. That DeGeneres’s original abjectness centered on her fatness—which is, to Sedgwick and Moon, abjection made visible—is certainly related to her desire to perform bodilessness, sometimes by means of rather proficient physical gags, in public.

- 12 I am aware that DeGeneres has come out, between drafts of this essay, on and off her tv show. I am defining her mode as stand-up; she retired from stand-up, but seems to be coming out of retirement now.
- 13 For Garber on Peter Pan, see *Vested Interests*, 165–85. “Transgression without guilt, pain, penalty, conflict, or cost: this is what Peter Pan—and *Peter Pan*—is all about. The boy who is really a woman; the woman who is really a boy; the child who will never grow up; the colony that is only a country of the mind.” The next chapter, “Cherchez La Femme,” begins: “Cross-dressing is a classic strategy of disappearance in detective fiction.” I want to combine effects: disappearance is the high road to transgression without pain.



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